

# Indigenous Knowledge and Rare Traditions of Western India's Janjati Communities

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## Abstract

The distinctive survival patterns used in the tropical rain forests to the semi-arid and dry lands, set apart the tribal culture of western India from the rest of the countryside. The tribes stand by with a contingency plan comprising several ancient techniques to sustain in the characteristic natural habitat. The evolution of these practices proceeds the settlement age of tribes. Their ways of hunting water species, procuring horopter greens, single seed farming, hamlet guarding, etc., are a complex yet simple ritualistic composition of technical skills, religious beliefs and artistic forms. But these ancient forms of wisdom passed from ancestors in small morsels got gradually altered by modern inventions; hence, making them a rare practice. Fish hunting in the *Mavchi* groups of western India is an example of such a rare practice. The joy of going in groups for hunting small fishes, the pre-preparations of threshing the *gooda* (a type of rice crop grown in water), making special concoctions to faint the fishes, singing songs in one voice while pulling the *chopdi* (a traditional net) filled with hunted fishes back from the water, and then equally distributing them amongst the members of the community. All these practices have become the story of the past. Now, the entry of big hybrid fish in the market has lost the joy of community for striving together to catch the fish, whereas it has also impacted the growth of the smaller fish in the rivers. Likewise, this paper showcases various other indigenous practices of *Dungri Bhils*, *Mavchis* and *Gond* that have led to the dual impacts of losing the indigenous knowledge and heritage and affecting the regional biodiversity of the tribal land. The

collection of rare practices in this paper is based on the extensive ethnographic field work conducted (2020-2023) amongst the *Mavchi*, *Bhil* and *Gond janjati* communities residing in the western part of India.

**Keywords:** Janjati communities, *Mavchi* groups, *Gond* communities, Indigenous Rare Practices

## Introduction

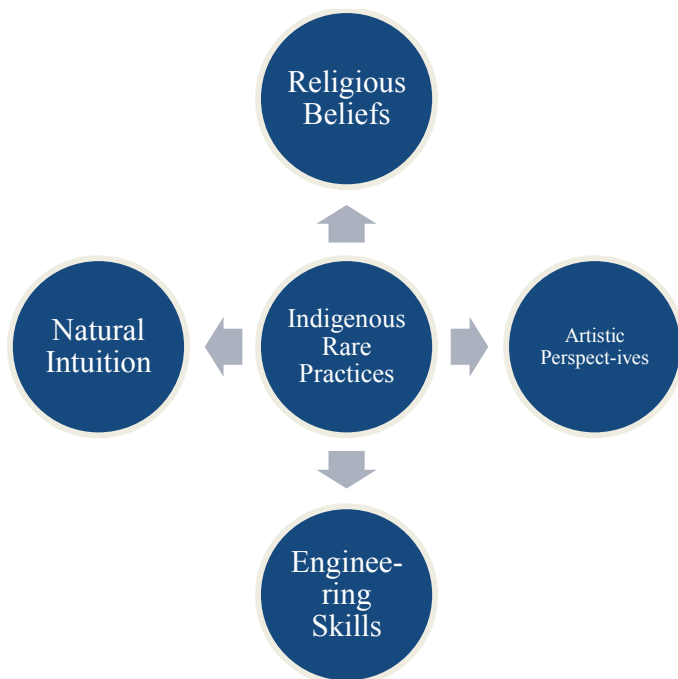
For indigenous communities nature is the life in whole. That is why they sing in harvest, they dance in falling leaves, they worship standing stones, they hunt in floating flows, and they see in skies and create in skilful crafts. Crafts that live a life of evergreen made out of pouring heart and harmony that remains undetermined until the whole of practice gets revealed (Whitetaker, 2019). This paper is an attempt to reveal the indigenous crafts and their regional craft makers. Crafts here signify the age-old practices that are fading and becoming rare to find in the contemporary times. Practices such as harvesting, hunting, procuring, preserving, singing, dancing, storytelling, worshipping and in general, living a symbiotic life in the reds by *Bhil*, *Mavchi* and *Gond* communities. These philosophical principles manifest in specific survival practices that span generations, each carrying layers of religious, artistic, engineering, and natural considerations that make them truly unique. This paper is an attempt to draw out a clear timeline to map the route of indigenous practices, once as a life supporter to now thriving hardly as a rare practice is shown through the stories and memories of this unique tribal culture.

In *Bhil*, *Mavchi* and *Gond* villages of the border regions of the four respective states viz., Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, we find a culture existing in its oral narratives, practices and memories that believe in ethics like worshipping nature, engaging in community work, distributing equal share of joy and sorrow and keeping the nature on an equal status as one's

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mother. Times immemorial this belt was “used to share common cultural performance and rituals that were identified as *Bhil Culture Zones*” (Roche, Autumn, 2000 - Winter, 2001). It also depicted that the “Adivasi people here were ecologically distinct from the settled ‘civilized’ people of the cultivated plains” (Arnold 2000: 8-9). They were called ‘*ecological engineers*’ (skilled people to design sustainable ecosystems that integrate human society with its natural environment) by William J. Mitsch (Mahato, 2020). Therefore, the records of the rare practices carried out by each of the above tribal zones are laid out to understand the deeper meanings, the philosophies and the ways they were engineered and executed in real life. Interestingly, they show a rich amalgamation of the religious, artistic, engineering and natural aspects to develop each practice as shown in the below diagram.



**Diagram 1: Essential aspects considered for carrying out indigenous practices.**

No practice can be created if one of the following aspects is missing. Hence, it is necessary to analyse these rare practices from the multiple lenses of socio-cultural norms. For a better and clearer understanding of the rare practices, this chapter tries to draw deep insights into the practices of a few janjati communities from Western India.

This state of *Dab Mandal* was comprised of various *Bhil* communities who had arrived here to start a living. The regions in the state of *Dab Mandal* that were occupied by the *Bhils* were identified as ‘*Saat Pati*’ meaning seven parts. Like many *Bhil* communities, the group of *Mavchi*

people also arrived in this state and commenced their living. This regional part of the *Dab Mandal* state where *Mavchis* resided was called ‘*Mavchar Pati*’ and the people residing in *Mavchar Pati* were recognized as ‘*Mavchis*’.

Although the *Mavchis* recollect their story of origin and settlement in a different way through oral narratives, one of the popular oral narratives amongst *Mavchis* tells that,

A long time ago, there was a cloud burst and the whole earth got covered with flood waters. There was devastation all over with man and animals dying. During a flood, the ancestors of *Mavchi* sheltered a boy and a girl in a basket, stowing some grains to survive with them. But the basket strained away in the flood water reaching to the *Satpudas*. When the tides calmed down, the people of *Satpuda* came out for fishing, finding the basket in which the boy and the girl were resting. Since then, the *Mavchis* settled in the hilly tracts of *Satpuda* (Field Notes).

## A. Fishing: the craftsmanship and religious connection

### Traditional Fishing

*Mavchis* are mainly non-vegetarians and fish are part of their diet. Traditionally, the *Mavchis* were experts in fish hunting and preferred to go for fishing in groups. But, interestingly, fishing starts after the threshing of the crops. Yes, a special type of rice crop called ‘*gooda*’ is grown in the river bed by the *Mavchis*. The conditions for growing *gooda* and doing fishing are similar, such as both needs a low level of water. So, once the *gooda* is threshed from the river bed, after that only waters get clear for doing fishing. Hence, first threshing, and then they go fish hunting. Now, before the fishing day, two or three men who had more knowledge in fishing used to go for a survey near the river bed. In the survey, the following things were examined:

1. Finding the direction of tidal flow of the river water,
2. Types of species,
3. Area in which a greater number of fishes are found swimming,
4. Where is the water level low, etc.

All these parameters were taken into consideration. The level of the water played an important role. It was necessary for safe fishing to get the level of water low. So, to achieve this, the *Mavchis* used to build a temporary small dam (*bandh*) like structure made out of tree barks and wood in a particular selected location of the river. This way the direction of the water got changed and the desired level of water was achieved to get ready for the day of fishing. Thus, the news that the river bed is ready for fishing the next day was announced in the village. The night before, the women used to prepare a concoction of

water in which a special type of leaf was added and was put to boil. This concoction was put in the river water, due to which the fish got unconscious for a small amount of time. This unconscious state of mind of the fishes used to become a moment of an easy catch for the *Mavchis*. Thus, with all the pre-preparations, everybody from the family, the men, the women and the children used to join in.

On the day of fish hunting, everybody used to carry their traditional equipment made by themselves. After reaching the location, the group decides to throw the net in the selected location. This process of throwing the net freely in the water is called '*chopdi takne*'. '*Chopdi*' is a special type of traditional net to catch the fish. Once, when the fishes are trapped in the net, the whole group sets themselves to pull out the net from the water with all the strength and lay it down onto the ground.

After a successful catch, the distribution of the fish was done equally amongst all the families depending on the quantity of the fish caught. In case of a big family, the distribution of fishes was mutually understood. Many times, even after putting in hard work by everybody in the group, the quantity of fish caught would be less and vice-versa, at that time as well, the distribution of fish was equally done. This shows the simple values and manners of sharing. This value and ethics are also maintained towards their natural environment. For ex., if a village does not have a river in their locality, then the group of fishers go to another village for fishing. This group first takes the permission from the members of the other village as to whether they can hunt the fish from their village river or not, and then only they proceed.

The above way was the most popular, called the 'group type' of fish hunting in the *Mavchar Pata* of *Khandesh*. Yet, there are two other ways in which traditional fish hunting was carried out. One being the 'single type' in which one or two persons from the family go fishing with traditional equipment called '*aasu*'. While thirdly, the *Mavchis* used to set the net called as '*modi*' in the direction of the water flow and the fishes automatically got trapped as and when the tidal waves came.

Whereas, in the *Dhaya Pata* region of *Vasave Mavchi*, bordering the state of Gujarat, a variation in the fishing activity is observed. Over here, the elderly people from four or five villages used to go for fishing together in the big rivers. These fishermen used to call themselves '*doyra*'. The tradition of these *doyra* is still remembered and given importance through a dance form named '*gosarya*' which keeps the tradition of fishing alive. In the '*gosarya*' dance form, the man dresses like a fisher woman with a basket of fish on his head and holds '*aachvi*', a weapon to catch fish in his hand.

## Artificial Fish Farming

Now, *Mavchis* have taken up a modern way of fish farming where artificial fish ponds are created through government initiatives in the village lakes and ponds. Earlier in the traditional way of fishing, the purpose of the *Mavchi's* towards hunting fish was only for eating and consumption for one's self. It was limited to household use. While in present times, in the 2000s, the popularity of artificial fish farming had increased. Now the purpose has become commercial. First the *Mavchis* consume only naturally grown small fishes from the small-sized local rivers, to name a few *molgi*, *mura*, *chikna* and *tebla*. Then they shift to fishes grown in the artificial ponds which are bigger and their eggs are brought from outside, which are different from the species found here locally. The names of such fish varieties are *Murgal*, *kotla*, *komda*, *rohu*, *funchiasios*. Due to this newer big species, the *Mavchis* now do not hunt the naturally growing small fishes in their rivers. These big fishes are easily available in the markets, and so people with purchasing capacity may directly buy them from the markets. Eventually, *Mavchis* are finding traditional fishing more time-consuming and a hard process.

This shift from traditional to commercial fishing reflects a broader pattern of economic transformation that threatens not only fishing traditions but also the ecological balance of local water systems and the social fabric of *Mavchi* communities.

## The Religious Connection of Fishing

The *Mavchi* villages enjoy fishing when the river beds are flowing with water. The consumption of fish is higher after the monsoons which lasts up to the winter. But, in summers majority of the rivers dry up and hence it's difficult to find a waterbody to go fishing. In such unexpected times if they discover a water body filled with water, they believe that particular water body is a miraculous blessing from nature God. They believe that there is surely some natural power that has protected this water body in such hard summers. Therefore, to pay for the work (*majuri*) of safeguarding the waterbody by that supernatural power in the form of offering a *shrifal* (coconut) to a symbolic tree or a stone nearby. *Mavchis* believe that if this place is not paid homage to, then from the next time, there will be no fishing beds available or maybe some natural calamity might strike in the village. So, they make sure to give gratitude in such conditions.

Thus, these were the indigenous ways and techniques and ethics and values of hunting fish, which are now replaced by the artificial fish farming.

## B. The *Mahua* Tree – Cultural Importance, Uses, Preservation and Collection

While fishing practices demonstrate the Mavchi community's relationship with water resources, the Gond community's deep connection with forest resources is exemplified through their relationship with the *Mahua* tree. One of the very popular *Gond* sayings, heaven is where there are *Mahua* trees and hell is where there is not enough *Mahua* trees to make wine (Bhanu Sridharan). Signifies the cultural importance of the *Mahua* tree in the lives of tribal people. The *Mahua* tree has a special status among NTFPs (Non-Timber Forest Products) as it is linked to the tribal livelihood systems in different ways (India and Forestry). The tree of *Mahua* serves a big portion in the daily diet of the tribals. The tree has always proved useful in the situation of food crises in their homes because it blossoms with its fruits and flowers throughout the year and thus, provides three F's- food, fodder and fuel (Bisht). The nutritional value of the *Mahua* flower shows rich content of sugar, protein and essential minerals that help fight skin disease, heat, headache, rheumatism and many more (Bisht).

Apart from meeting food and other requirements, it is also an important source of seasonal income. The flowers of *Mahua* are used in brewing liquor, which is very popular in the tribal areas. It is used as the main food as well as an additional ingredient to increase the quantity of the food in case there are many mouths to be fed.

The tribals considered *Mahua* as a floral wealth gifted to them by nature and therefore, they believed in enjoying the equivalent share of this wealth. The people guarded the trees collectively and never picked the flowers fallen on the ground secretly. They used to let them dry naturally and when the budding season got over and the trees got flowerless, the village guard would go around the village with his drum and give a call to all the villagers to gather their share of flowers. Thus, there was no private ownership of the tree. After the flowering season is over, the tree produced the fruit of *tolambis* and they were also preserved collectively and shared equally. While the *Mahua* flowers were used to make the flour and wine, the *tolambis* were used to extract oil which was also sold as a market commodity. Thus, in the absence of food grains, these flowers and fruits were used in a daily diet and also used as a source of income.

### Food habits of *Mavchi*

The breakfast is typically prepared in a *Mavchi* house consists of *tatatli bhakar* or *chapati* (Indian bread) with the herbal tea without milk. While the breakfast is being prepared, the men in the house go and check on the hens

and chickens that were hidden under the basket last night to safeguard them from the bigger animals. As he wakes them up by lifting the basket, the chickens and the hens start running all over the place. After these tiny ones, now, the time is to see the cows and the bullocks tied at the side of the hamlet. The women also join at this place and both the men and women get engaged with the work of the cow shed. The women clean the shed, take away the cow dung, bathe the animal and take out the milk of the animal. At the same time, the men arrange the grass for feeding the cows and go to deliver or sell the milk to a local dairy in the village.

After completing the cleansing work, the women start the preparation for afternoon lunch. *Dal* (curry), *bhaat* (rice) and *bhaji* or chicken are a part of the daily diet in a *Mavchi* family. The women soak the *tandul* (rice) in a container and go to fetch fresh *bhaji* from the water body nearby. With their bare foot, they enter into the wet, slippery red soil and identify the *bhaji* (green leafy vegetables) from the varieties of naturally grown vegetation in the water body. The leaves of the *bhaji* are plucked one by one and is put in the *pishvi* (bag) to take back home. After coming back, the *bhaji* is cut and cooked with the *tandul*. Some of the water grown *bhajis* are *jilla* (benefits in eye sight problems), *naadi* (for stomach ache) and *gooda chi bhaji*. The *bhaji* is also sold by the women in the nearby town markets. Sometimes this activity of procuring the *bhaji* from the waterbody also proves dangerous as there is danger of water insects and other creatures that can bite on the body.

Some of the home-grown vegetables are *ambadi* (sour tasting vegetable used in curry), *matla* (green leafy vegetable), *vangi* (brinjal), *mirchi* (green chili). Apart from these foods, seasonal *loncha* (pickle) and simple dry *khada* masala such as *haldi* (turmeric powder), red chili powder, *rai* (mustard seeds), *jeera* (cumin seeds) and salt stored in *masalya* (container) are added while preparing food. While paste of fresh green chilies, pounded red chili or soaked tamarind paste is added as sprinklers or as dips to enhance taste.

## C. Unique Infrastructural Practices for Preserving Socio-Cultural Bonding and Grain:

### Method of Building the House

Generally, the Gonds build a house on their own. They are experts in cutting wood and hence they bring the wood on their own from the jungle. In addition to wood, they require bamboo, ropes and *mova* grass to build the house. The Gonds have a system of '*Bigar*' to construct houses. When people from the neighbouring houses in the Gond community join hands to help the owner to construct the

house, such group practice is called *Bigar*. Similar practice known as *Halma* is found in the tribals of Jhabhua and Alirajpur districts of Madhya Pradesh. When building the house, firstly, the logs of *sarai* tree are laid perpendicular and at the distance of eight to nine feet from the pillars, on top of it three thick logs of *barendi* tree are arranged. They are tied very neatly and tight with the ropes that even after ten years their hold does not dismantle. Be it scorching summers, heavy rain or the coldest night of the winter, this house is so sturdy that it stays strong. Only the *mova* grass is toppled again on the same grass laid on the roofs as they do get spoiled over some time. The *mova* grass is widely used as it is cheaply available and keeps the house cool in summers. The walls of the house are made by weaving the bamboo, *sarai*, *amera*, *khadiya* and *kathi* tree's stem. After weaving the stems, they are coated with a mix made out of mud and cow dung. After the completion of constructing the house, the owner of the house gives a treat of *Mahua* liquor to the members who participated in *Bigar*.

### The Making of *Noh Dora*

The Gonds create beautiful decorations on the walls of houses. The main door entrance of the house is enhanced by drawing thick borders of approx. 0.75 inches made out of *geru* and *kajal* called as *Noh Dora*. As per the available data, in the initial period, there was no art form visible in the Gond culture except while constructing an altogether new house. *Noh Dora* were drawn on the walls and in the veranda of the new house. There were special women artists who drew illustrations of birds and animals besides *Noh Dora*. The women artists formed various triangular and rectangular forms of boxes in the corners of the border. Leaves, petals, branches and flowers were drawn at the corner of this geometric border, sometimes taking the form of any birds or animals such as peacock, rabbit or cats. At present, the *Noh Dora* are found in the different colours of green and white, which are made out of dried leaves. Thus, enhancing the beauty of the Gond houses.

### Kothi

The *Bhils* have maintained the architecture and interiors of their house made out of natural things, which has various significance ranging from miscellaneous, cultural, decorative and preservation purposes. It expresses beauty and utility at the same time. Be it their *kabla* or *kothi* storage containers made out of forest woods such as *santhi* or *vanhanti* (bamboo) that last grains for twenty years without damage by insects. The container that is believed to supply food in a never-ending way. The word

*kothi* in Sanskrit *koshtha* means storage. It has no lesser significance than an *Akshaypatra* which was considered as a gift of the Gods to the Pandavas. To the Pandavas in their period of banishment in the forest, the inexhaustible vessel proved to be the life and solace, which was beautiful in its utility and unending in its form. Similar is the importance of a *kothi* in *Bhils* life. These *kothis* are five to seven feet tall in a cylindrical shape, almost equal throughout with a wide mouth and a lid covering it. The base has small legs on the three or four sides that keep the *kothi* at a distance from the floor, avoiding any insect or water touching it. The craftsmen in this case, the older women in the house, who create this *kothis* have produced an opulent vessel of ancient times. These are, although getting replaced by other materials, as the older ladies are left less in number and also because the need for storing grains for such long years has also reduced.

### Paato

Their *paato* i.e. traditional refrigerator made out of mud by the older women in the community is used for storing dairy products such as milk, curd and ghee (clarified butter).

### Godi and Ravajo

And the *god*i and *ravajo* a pot and a thick wooden stick used for churning curd to make buttermilk out of it. The *god*i has a broad base, a narrow mouth and a little convex shoulder wall. The churning with wooden *ravajo* leads to excessive beating of the curd against the convex wall resulting in separating the ghee from *chas* (buttermilk). The black base indicates that it was baked on fire. It is also used for gathering and heating milk, and converting it into curd and butter.

### Taku

The small corners in the house called *taku* are used for keeping daily usage things such as bags, combs, tiffin, etc. The *taku* is found in different shapes and sizes, depending upon the space available in the walls and type of objects to be stored into it. Commonly they are rectangular or square.

### Holy Paniyaras

*Holy paniyaras* is a corner in the house where a lamp is lit to protect the house from the evil eye, so that all the members of the house live in good health and wealth. Or their *teer kamtha* (bow and arrow) that makes them remember their valorous past.

These earlier elements have not only survived side by side with new changes but have also influenced one another. Interestingly, when an old custom and tradition modernises because of upcoming new technologies, then there comes a gradual transition from the old to the new situation. The elements at this period of transition throw a ray of light on the creative process of people and the craftsmen present in the community. The old and new elements are tried to be fused and this process creates a hybrid arrangement. Out of which some are discarded over some time, and some continue to become part of the day-to-day life and culture. E.g. the gourd-shaped pots or the *kothi's* seen above. Though now we see brass, silver, aluminium, plastic or pots and *kothis* made out of many other materials, but one cannot deny the survival of 'primitive' element over the new technological advancement on this product. That is the historical achievement of ancient cultures seen in the houses of the *Bhil Adivasis* or for that matter even *Mavchi* and the *Gond* communities.

At present these houses are missing the *chilkaris* (noise) of their young boys and girls and the children who at once were the major participants of the colorful festivals and customs. The ones who sang songs and danced the whole night under the moon at the marriage of their brothers and sisters.

#### **D. Transmission of Indigenous Medicinal Knowledge in Maja Tolas:**

*Gonds* spend their entire life with the help of very limited resources available around them. All the daily needs are fulfilled from nature and the majority of the day-today products are crafted by themselves. Various *Gond* sub-types who are experts in several skills and occupations reside in the *Maja Tolas*. Hence, the community automatically becomes self-reliant without the need to seek help from people outside the *tolas*. With the permission of the headman of the *Maja Tola*, in every *Tola* an *ahir*, an *agariya* and a *guniya* were made to reside compulsorily. The *ahirs* do not belong to the *Gond* community but are specially allowed to reside between the *Gonds* to take care of the cattle. *Ahirs* took the cattle of the *Gonds* for grazing and brought the water from the wells and other water bodies around the *tolas*. While the *agariya's* was occupied with the work of iron smelting and preparing ornaments, vessels and equipment. And the life saver *guniyas* treated community members with his knowledge of जड़ी-बूटी (forest medicine and vanshipati) and झाड फुक (*tantra-mantra*), a type of psychological treatment. *Guniyas* are also recognized as the inheritors of *Sushen Vaidya*, the great *Vaidya* in *Ramayana* who treated *Lakshman* (brother of Lord *Ram*). *The Pardhans*

(most brilliant ones) went village to village to sing the mythological stories and songs for entertainment.

It was then the duty of the persons like *Guniyas* and *Pardhans* who were compulsorily appointed in the *Maja Tola* to serve the people selflessly and pass the knowledge of medicine, story-telling and agriculture to the next generation. *Fuchs* (1965) tells that the above traditional knowledge was entitled to be the property of certain families and sub-castes only to be handed down from one generation to the other in *Maja Tola*. The headmen of the *Maja Tola* enforced certain customary laws and prohibitions that were associated with residing in the *Maja Tola* to ensure a secure environment and protect the *Gond* knowledge and values falling into the hands of the other communities. Hence the custodianship of the *Maja Tola* was handed to the *Guniyas* who were "believed to be magicians and soothsayers who use their powers to cure the sick and offended deities" while the *Pardhans* through their "theological and philosophical beliefs weaved myths and legends that narrate the trivial incidents in nature" (*Fuchs*).

The knowledge of indigenous treatment like *tantra-mantra* was intertwined with religious beliefs, which has no story of origin. This knowledge is transferred from generation to generation via word of mouth, discussions and the teachings from the gurus like *daugan guru*, *burhakamar guru*, *dhantar guru* (also known as Lord *Dhanvantari*), *nindhan guru*, *jalandhar guru* and many others who learn and impart this knowledge to cure people. The people of this community are religious in terms of worshipping the nature deities and the rivers, trees, hills and believe in ghosts, witches, etc. Every village has a reserved place where the deity is placed and worshipped. It is believed that the deity is responsible for all the fortunes and misfortunes coming to the village. A very strong belief about this kind of treatment amongst the *Gond Adivasi* is that there are certain powers in the nature and universe which decide for the auspicious or inauspicious events in human life. And to achieve certain virtuous blessings and avoid sinful happenings in one's life, the *Gond Guniyas* practise *mantra*, and *jhaad-phuk* which work as a miracle to take out problems from one's life. *Jhaad-phuk* is a knowledge acquired by the *guniyas* who have the expertise in recognizing the deities that abode in the hooks and corners of the village and forests that are invisible. The treatment of *jhaad-phuk* is done when these supernatural deities are upset with a person, due to which the person goes through physical or psychological problems. While *mantra* can be compared to the Vedic *mantra* or astrological *mantras* practiced by civilized cultures or in modern societies to increase their luck factor or improve the quality of life.

## E. Religious practices of Panchmahal Bhils

*Dhunis* in the Panchmahal region of Gujarat are not only sacred spaces for religious rituals but also powerful symbols of the Bhil community's resistance against British colonial rule. This profound tradition was introduced by Govindgiri, also known as Govind Guru Banjara (1858–1931), in the early 1900s. Through the Bhagat movement, Govindgiri sought to uplift the tribal communities by enhancing their moral character, habits, and religious practices. His revolutionary ideas and growing influence among the Bhils alarmed the British authorities, leading to his arrest in 1913 following the tragic massacre at Mangadh Hill, located at the border of Gujarat and Rajasthan. This massacre, often misrepresented in historical records, was a brutal suppression of the Bhil community's quest for justice and freedom. Today, the sacred *dhuni* at Mangadh stands as a lasting testament to the Bhils' resilience and devotion.

Traditionally, a *dhuni* is a sacred fire altar used for havans, where offerings like ghee and coconuts are made to the fire as part of Vedic Hindu rituals to invoke divine energy and purify the surroundings. However, in the Mangadh region, this sacred fire holds deeper significance, it serves as a holy shrine dedicated to Govindgiri, embodying both spiritual reverence and the enduring spirit of the Bhil community's struggle.

The seven flags that adorn the *dhuni* carry profound symbolic meaning, though their exact origin or significance may vary. Spiritual leaders and Gurus have offered diverse interpretations based on the colors and symbols of the flags. These interpretations often suggest:

- The colors represent various deities or facets of spiritual enlightenment.
- The symbols may signify natural elements, earth, fire, water, air, and ether, or embody specific energies and deities worshipped during the yajna.

These flags, like the *dhuni* itself, are not merely ritualistic but serve as vibrant reminders of the Bhils' cultural heritage and spiritual path, deeply intertwined with their historical fight for freedom.

## Conclusion

The gradual fading of indigenous survival practices among the Mavchi, Bhil, and Gond tribes of western India reveals a complex interplay between cultural heritage, ecological balance, and modernization pressures. These communities have developed sophisticated systems of resource management that integrate religious beliefs, technical skills, and artistic expression into a cohesive way of life. The documented practices, from traditional fishing techniques and medicinal knowledge to architectural

innovations and religious rituals, represent not just survival approaches but comprehensive worldviews that maintained both community cohesion and environmental sustainability for generations. The contemporary scenario, marked by the foray of modernization and ecological changes, has significantly altered the traditional way of life. The transition from community-based fishing to commercial fish farming, the replacement of medicinal *guniyas* with modern healthcare, and the abandonment of traditional housing methods illustrate how external influences have disrupted age-old equilibriums between humans and nature.

The paper underlines that the complete loss of these practices would be detrimental not only to tribal cultural identity but also to valuable ecological knowledge systems that modern conservation efforts could learn from. To protect these invaluable traditions, multifaceted approaches are necessary, viz. comprehensive documentation of remaining practices, revival initiatives that respect traditional knowledge custodians, and creative amalgamation with present-day traditional wisdom with modern ecological conservation strategies offers the most promising path forward. This integration must prioritize the active participation of tribal communities in decision-making processes and identify their traditional knowledge as legitimate and important. It is important to ensure that tribal knowledge continues to thrive while adapting to present-day realities, eventually creating a sustainable future that honors both tradition and development.

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Dr Meera Vasani & Dr. Swara Joshi field study conducted during 2020 to 2023 in various areas like *Khandesh* Region, *Gondwana* Region, *Mangadh* region, etc.

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