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## UNIT 4 DYNAMICS OF TRIBAL IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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After having read this Unit you will be able to:

- know about various views regarding tribal identity;
- understand the process of Rajputisation of tribal groups particularly the *Bhil*; and
- see the manner of the transformation of the *Bhil* through Bhagat movements.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The *Bhil*, along with various sub-groups, constitute 14.28 % (1981 census) of the total tribal population of India. They are spread over a large territory of Western India which includes Southern Rajasthan, Western Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Due to a variety of historical experiences and the impact of various forces they have been changing over time. They have various patterns of similarity with the people of neighbouring castes. Different tribal groups which are related to the *Bhil* have their own individuality, cultural distinctiveness and ethnic solidarity. Owing to continuous cultural contact and interaction with other neighbouring groups, the *Bhil* are undergoing transformation. They modify their customs and many of them now claim to be Rajputs. A trend of upward mobility can be noticed in this tendency. Many of them resemble Rajputs in social habits and are very near to the Rajput pole in caste hierarchy at many places.

Many Gurus preached monotheism and moral precepts to the *Bhil Adivasis* to take them away from their animistic way of life to Bhagatism. Such movements - known as Bhagat movements - won over a large number of disciples in a short span of time. These disciples styled themselves as Bhagats. In this way, the *Bhil* tribe aspired to culturally relocate themselves towards a better way of life. They shed superstitions, addiction to liquor and proneness to crime. Thus, the Bhagat

movement transformed the *Bhil Bhagats* into endogamous groups within their tribal fold.

'Folk' Representations by/  
of Dalits and Tribals

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## 4.2 DYNAMICS OF TRIBAL IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION

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Amongst the anthropologists, there is the emergence of a broad consensus on the view that tribal society changes in accordance to the inner law of its constitution. The nature of the institutions which change and that which do not, determine the nature, tendency and direction of the transition of a tribal society. For this, one has to identify the anatomy of the tribal social formation and relate it to later developments - its gradual incorporation into the larger political, social and economic framework. Indian tribal society has been defined by anthropologists through a set of attributes such as: the absence of exploiting classes and organized state-structure; all-pervasiveness of religion; segmented character of the socio-economic unit; frequent co-operation for common economic goals; shallow history; distinct taboos, customs and moral codes; the youth dormitory; a low level of technology; common names, territories, descent, language, culture etc. Thus, this shows that in spite of being defined and understood as a functioning totality, the tribal community is being viewed through a set of attributes.

Andre Beteille questions the attempts to specify the characteristics of tribal societies in general. He feels that the attempted difference between tribal and peasant society is not adequate because there are examples where tribal communities share the characteristics of caste societies. There are instances where even tribal people approximate the characteristics of peasants. Prof. Virginius Xaxa tries to define a tribe as a community or as *Jana*. According to him, the conceptualization of tribes as *Jana* will lead to the study of dynamics of transformation of tribes on their own terms and not as a process of disintegration of tribal identity into larger stratified societies.

It was D.N. Majumdar who first raised the notion of the Indian tribes being in a state of transition. After him came many anthropologists who have written about the tribal situation in India. There is no doubt that major changes have been taking place among the tribal people. Their isolation has been broken down or been reduced. As one looks into the social institutions of the tribes, one can see clearly that they have gradually been transformed. The conditions under which the histories of these tribes are recorded are precisely those which are associated with a change in their life pattern.

Historically, the transition from a specific mode of organization to another is due to increase in productivity issuing from labour. The emergence of surplus is followed by economic differentiation and change in social division of labour. Due to inventions, discoveries and increased knowledge, productivity has increased as well. These types of changes bring changes in the division of labour which is followed by economic transformation. The direction of economic and social change is determined by the emergence of social surplus and concomitant ecological processes. Meillassoux feels that population density has played a decisive role in the transformation of pre-capitalist societies, with both social and technical reproduction.

Whenever there is a break in the pattern of the social basis of production, transformation occurs. When the family is the basic unit of production, the local resources are appropriated with conventional technology. Here production is not meant for the market but for self-consumption. The tribal people have, all along, been in continuous interaction with the peasant castes which possess superior technology for agricultural production. Under such conditions, we see obvious inter-connections between the different castes and the tribal society. K.S. Singh notes, "As surpluses emerged, economic differentiation and social stratification developed in tribal society." The penetration of British Colonialism also altered the living conditions and patterns of Indian tribal societies. Initially we find no concept of private property amongst the tribal groups. Kosambi notes that land was only a territory and not a property. Food was shared by all. With the subsequent introduction of various measures, land gradually got converted into private property.

The integration of pre-capitalism into capitalism has brought about a variety of structural changes. As a result of this, the tribal system has got affected as a whole. With the changes in the outside world, the tribal communities have also displayed changes in their economy, polity and cultures. Not being static frozen entities, they struggle to release themselves from the grip of domination, discrimination and control. These tribal societies also possess an internal dynamics as the people and formations keep changing continuously.

Identity provides a sense of assertion to ethnic groups. Identity means a sense of being at one with oneself. At the same time, it also means a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as history or mythology. The group may take up some elements from the other group or groups while asserting its own group's identity. It may indigenize and incorporate those elements.

In the course of the people's participation in economic and social processes, social consciousness is the reflection of the objective conditions. The ethnic consciousness is reflected in the forms of ideology and assertion movements.

Various communities adapt to the surrounding conditions and cultures through different methods of fusion and fission. The path cannot be considered unilinear and one has to look beyond empirical and cultural explanations. There are complex socio-economic and histoico-culturall processes which shape the transformation of the tribal communities. They have slowly started responding to changes taking place around them by developing a critical consciousness, expressing their dissatisfaction and reaffirming their identities.

Both the communities of the tribal groups and the surrounding caste societies have relations with each other in the social organization of production within the framework of dominance. In a situation where the tribal social formation encounters feudal or capitalist social formations, the main challenge is to devise ways to break down the self-sufficiency of the former, so that it is incorporated in their network of appropriation.

Tribal societies are articulated with capitalism in order to derive cheap labour and products. The tribal society produces for the survival and multiplication, for the consumption of its members to create human energy. The satisfaction of the objectives and goals of capitalism by harnessing a mechanism and control of

human beings is the main reason for such articulation. The system of production by human beings and their labour could be harnessed in two ways:

- 1) By production of industrial raw material, agro products and 'exotica' for which a demand exists in the markets.
- 2) To provide cheap labour for industries. To articulate the tribal social system with capitalism, the autonomy of the tribal social formation must break up.

For the dissolution of the tribal social formation, many extra-economic measures, including the use of force by state is required. In many cases these methods amount to appropriation of land. The tribal people are forced to seek cash through several measures such as taxes, forced labour, conscription debt etc. The self-dependence of the tribal society is thus broken. Once it is done, Rey feels that the tribal social formation has been cracked open and capitalism takes root in the old relations. Direct government pressure is no more needed to make the tribal people produce for the market. Geschire, on the basis of his observations on the fieldwork in Makaland, however stresses the continuation of the role of the government in creating conditions of appropriation of surplus.

Marx also shows the continued role of state in maintaining capitalist exploitation. We can thus assume that the state continues to play a role in the maintenance of the articulation of tribal and capitalist social formations even after money takes root in old relations. However, it is equally correct to suggest, like Meillassoux and Rey, that once money takes root in the tribal economy, it leads to an irreversible dependence of the tribal society on money. The entry of cash into this system breaks its self-dependence and forces the tribal to sell his products and/or his labour by entering the market.

The articulation of the tribal society with capitalism leads to the subordination of the former. Some mutations and transformations within it also take place. This results in increased asymmetry in the internal structure the *Adivasi* community. Introduction of trade, cash and increased control of the elderly also lead to asymmetrical relationships between the tribal communities.

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### 4.3 TRANSFORMATION AMONG THE *BHIL*

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The traditional *Bhil* area is surrounded by hills and there are no good roads to get there, thus endowing the tribe with a kind of uniqueness. There is nothing special about it because different geographical areas tend to develop an integrated culture different from the others, at least in some respects. Historically, the *Bhil* have distinctive traits different from those of neighbouring cultures. They also show some qualities of a ruling community. With an integration strengthened by recognition of homogeneity or a consciousness of kind, the idea of social stratification is evident among the *Bhils*.

When the configuration pattern of a culture comes in contact with other culture, it undergoes transformation. The culture of the first group takes up many characteristics from the impinging culture. In the case of *Bhils*, the main source of the contacts was the impact from the surrounding Rajput culture. They developed a sense of superiority, claiming that " we are brave, we are the courageous, we are the kings of the forest, we are the children of tigers." They sing likewise:

“Shur Amu, Mard Amu,  
Jonglo Mena, Raja Amu.”

Hinduism as a body of beliefs, customs taboos and superstitions, has so much in common with the religion of the *Bhils* that they consider themselves as Hindus. It is noted that at places the *Bhils* are forgetting their gods, the lower ones in the hierarchy being ignored and those on the next higher rank coming next and so on. They remember their chief gods but have forgotten about the sons and daughters of those gods. They have started worshipping Hindu gods of the lower strata.

Among the *Bhils* of West Khandesh, a *Bhil* named Gulia (later he assumed the title of *Maharaj*: a saint) started a reform campaign of a more or less religious nature. He asked them not to consume liquor or *tadi*. Influenced by his sermons, many of the *Bhils* became teetotalers. Smarting under the consequent loss of revenue from liquor sales, one of the dealers arranged to have Maharaj murdered.

Another *Bhil* named Viswanath Maharaj of Rewakantha also initiated a reformatory movement. He is said to have given the Hindu sacred thread, *Janau*, to seventy five thousand *Bhils*. They all become *Bhagats*, i.e. devotees. They stopped drinking *haro* and *tadi*. They took vows not to eat meat, not to drink tap water and not to consume foods prepared by a *non-Bhagat*. These devotees would visit Maharaj's place once a year on foot and take *Prasad* (sacred offerings) from him.

In the Panch Mahal area also, we find mention of many *Bhils* who became *Bhagats* because of the influence of someone called Govind Guru. They stopped taking liquor and meat, began to bathe every day and sing sacred hymns. In the religion of *Bhils* ritual or magic is slowly vanishing.

These are instances of a socio-psychological phenomenon, the need for which arises from a troubled feeling of sin or guilt, unworthiness and incompleteness and a desire to climb the ladder of social stratification.

The *Bhils* are now taking to the dress of neighbouring Rajputs (Hindus). A *Bhil* can be seen in a shirt, a short coat and a *dhoti*. Mercerized *Dhotis* have also reached the *Bhils* and the women have started wearing mill-made sarees and city-cut blouses. In fact, the *Bhils* now know and have begun to use everything that an average Indian living in a village knows and uses.

Because of the social contact with neighbouring castes and tribes, they have imbibed some traits of Hindu society. The idea of caste and the idea of super ordinate-subordinate relationship therein is prevalent among them, similar to the Hindus. They also have the idea of untouchability. *Bhil* women who were not aware of the *Purdah* (veil), are now seen covering their faces. Many of them do not take part in their own dances, do not sing their own songs, so do not know their mythology and even their own ceremonies.

T.B. Naik in his book **The *Bhils*** has cited songs which are called *Ras*. They are sung by the *Bhils* in praise of some great personages of the past or some of their mighty deeds.

This song commemorates the valour of the *Bhils* and the Rajputs who fought against Bahadur Khan of the *Suba* of Baroda in 1700 A.D:

The streets of *Bhilod* are very narrow.  
In it was ensnared Bahadur Khan.  
The Sondachiyas were so brave  
That fallen on the ground  
They would shoot arrows!  
The Golachiyas, the lords of gola,  
Dealt blows on the back  
The Khers were strong as the  
Stumps of the *Kher* tree;  
They cut down the camels of Bahadur Khan.  
The Fichwadiyas were so firm of hand  
They cut at a stroke the spines of his horses!  
The fichwadiyas from the trees  
Attacked him with stones thrown from the slings.  
On the road to Pantalwadi  
Bahadur was enjoying a horse ride  
(but said he ) "Let me go alive from *Bhilod*.  
If I come back, I will eat a swine."

The following *Ras* speaks of the strength of Damji, the *Bhil* Chieftain of Sagbara who helped the king of Rajpipla against the British when they tried to take the latter into custody.

Damji was the *Vasawo* of Sagbara  
And Bahadurio his *Vaji*;  
Damji came to see the king,  
His horse was greenish in colour;  
It was shining wonderfully,  
It had a silver saddle.  
He rode it back a little  
And pressed his heels against it  
The horse jumped three jumps together.  
In front of him and behind him  
Crowds of *Bhils* were marching;  
Damji had a golden ring.  
A note came from the Government,  
In Damiji's house there was a copper pot.  
There was a call to him from Ratanpur.  
Prepare bricks. Both *Kachha* and *Pucca*,

And build a hundred bridges;  
Damji had a silken thread in his house.  
Put that man's daughter in jail;  
Damji had a rope for his elephant;  
Tie tightly that man's wife  
I will cut down forest and trees and  
Construct roads along the hills.'  
He took five guns with him  
And gunpowder ready with it.  
'O Mother, I fall at thy feet;  
I am thy servant  
O, you hated one, take off your hat;  
Otherwise I will auction your corpse;'

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#### 4.4 RAJPUTISATION OF THE *BHILS* OF MEWAR

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The popular imagination of the *Bhils* is one of fascination and fear, both lawless and grateful. Many studies on state formation among the tribes and in areas of their domination have proved the idea of the tribe as an 'isolate' a fallacy. According to the studies regarding the *Bhumijis* of Brabhum, the *Nagabanshis* of Chhotanagpur, the *Ahoms* of Assam, state formations in Orissa, Eastern and North Eastern India, the presence of the process of acculturation has become evident. In many of these areas, Rajputs are considered as agents of change. This process has been aptly described as Kshatriyaization or Rajputisation. In Western and Central India, the interaction between the Rajputs and tribals has been seen as the Rajputisation of certain sections of tribes as well as tribalization for some of the Rajputs. There are instances of the *Bhilala Bhils* (progeny of Rajput fathers and *Bhil* mothers) and several other *Bhil* groups of southern Rajasthan claiming Rajput origin. In a similar manner, the *Girasia*s of Rajasthan also claim to be descendants of Rajputs from *Bhil* women.

In comparison to other *Bhil* groups, the *Bhilalas* claim a superior rank. The *Bhil* chiefs of Oghna-Panarwa claim their descent from the Rajputs of the Solanki lineage. They are the ones who can be considered as the oldest case of Rajputisation of the *Bhils* of Southern Rajasthan. The *Bhil* belt of Oghna-Panarwa is situated in the core of Mewar state i.e. Nagda Ahad in the Udaipur district.

According to B.D.Chattopadhyaya, "The process of caste formation remained the essence social processes which drew widely dispersed and originally outlying groups into a structure which allowed them in a large measure to retain their original character except that this character was defined with reference to the structure." In his study on Pudukhohai state, Nicholas B. Dirks notes, "Caste was embedded in a political context of kingship and therefore, was linked to royal authority, honour, notions of power, dominance and order."

While studying *Bhilalas*, there emerges the scope of viewing the *Bhils* in a spectrum. The process of Rajputisation shows the emergence of differentiation

within the erstwhile 'egalitarian' tribes, when it came in contact with a stratified society. The process of Rajputisation is more among the *Bhils* and the related tribes in the *Bhil* area because of their age-old relations with the Rajputs who were considered as warrior groups in the past.

The *Bhil*alals like being called *Darbars* because they are very near that pole. The *Darbars* want to be called Rajputs. By doing this, they are striving for the next ascending position in the social spectrum.

According to Bardic traditions, Guhila, the founder of the Guhila lineage was the posthumous son of the last king of Vabhi, Siladitya. Before committing *Sati*, his queen Pushpavati gave birth to Guhila in a cave in the hills of Mallia. She chose a Brahmini woman, Kamlavati of Birnagar to look after him and instructed her to bring up the prince as a Brahman but to marry him to a Rajputani. As he came of age, he started playing in the woods in the company of the *Bhils*. One day while playing a game, the *Bhil* boys elected him their king. A young *Bhil* cut his finger and applied blood to put the *tika* of sovereignty on his forehead. This game was officially recognised by the *Bhil* chief of that area and Guhadatta (Guhila) was rewarded with the headship of one village. Later Guhila treacherously killed his benefactor and became the founder of the royal lineage of Mewar. Tired of his rule, the *Bhils* killed Nagaditya, the eighth successor of Guhadatta. Kamlavati's descendents who were hereditary priests of the Guhilas, removed Nagaditya's son (Bappa) to the hills of Nagda. Bappa married the princess of a local Solanki chief. Offended, the Solanki chief set out to hunt him and Bappa fled with two *Bhil* friends to the Trikuta hills of Nagda. Later, Bappa entered the service of Mori king of Chittor. After some time Bappa wrested Chittor from the Mori and himself became the Mor (crown of the land).

It is evident that the Guhilas formed their state in a predominantly *Bhil* area. The killing of the *Bhil* chief by Guhadatta is perceived by the *Bhils* as an ingratitude of the Rajputs. The slaying of the *Bhil* chief in reality shows the conquest of the *Bhils* by the Guhila Rajputs. The revolt of the *Bhils* against Nagaditya symbolizes that the transfer of power to the Guhilas was not smooth. Due to their significance, the ruling dynasty had to make the *Bhils* their allies. This alliance is reflected in the legendary association of Bappa Rawal with the *Bhils* of Oghna-Panarwa and Oondri though officially such tie-ups are not mentioned.

For the smooth process of integration, headship was conferred on the *Bhil* leader of Oghna-Panarwa. He was also conferred with the title of 'Rana' and belongs to the category of *Bhumia* chiefs. Tod observes that the estate of Oghna-Panarwa was attached to no state, had no foreign communication, and lived under its own head, a chief with the title of Rana, 'head of five thousand bows.' Robert Deliege also states that many of the *Bhils* and *Bhilala* chiefs are described as *Bhumias* or *Girasias* (derived from *giras* - subsistence on a share of the produce of land). The *Bhils* of this area enjoyed their own independence even if they had to pay tribute. Not only the *Bhils* but many Rajputs also enjoyed the title of *Bhumia* and *Girasia* chiefs in Mewar. While the *Bhumias* rendered local service and also paid a small annual quitrent, the *Girasias* provided specified troops to the state.

Traditional evidence is available to the effect that the *Bhils* fought for both Rana Hammira in the fourteenth century and Rana Pratap in the sixteenth century.

A Solanki Rajput chief, Akshaya Raj settled in Panarwa. One of his successors settled in Oghna in sixteenth century. Due to their presence in Oghna-Panarwa, marriages between the *Bhils* and Solankis took place. Thus the chiefs of Oghna-Panarwa claim Solanki descent.

The incorporation of the goddess *Vindhyavasini* in the state pantheon of Mewar illustrates the importance of the *Bhils* for the state of Mewar. *Vindhyavasini* ranks just next to *Ekalingaji*, the presiding deity of Mewar. She is also the goddess worshipped by the core area *Bhils*. She is introduced and identified as *Parvati* (consort of *Siva*) at the beginning of *Ekalinga-Mahatmya*, Shala Purana of Mewar. Her *tirtha* is eulogized among other *tirthas* of Mewar. Though the cult prevalent in Mewar is of *Parvati*, it is *Vindhyavasini* and not *Parvati* who is integrated into the supra-local pantheistic structure of Mewar. It is evident that the dominant autochthonous deity was royally patronized by the local rulers. This shows that *Vindhyavasini* of Mewar seems to have undergone a process of Hinduization as is evident from her identification with *Parvati*. The incorporation of *Vindhyavasini* into the state-pantheon drew the *Bhils* toward the Saiva traditions. This can be viewed as a process of integration of *Bhils* through Saivism.

The *Bhils* started emulating the Rajputs by assimilating into the cults of *Siva* and *Parvati*. This is evident from their folklore and they celebrate the festival of *Gangaur* (*Gana-Siva* and *Gaur-Guari/ Parvati*) with fervor. Records are available of *Bhils*' participation in *Gangaur* in large numbers, specially in *Gogunda*. Every *Bhil* girl dances with a clay image of *Gangaur* ( image of *Gauri*) on her head. They dress the image of *Gangaur* like a *Bhil* maiden. The celebrated theme of a *Bhil* folk-song is the gathering of the *Bhils* at the annual fair of *Banswara Mahadev* (situated in *Dungarpur* district on the confluence of rivers *Som* and *Mah*). Another important tribe of Southern Rajasthan, the *Bhil Girasias* also celebrate the *Gangaur* festival with great enthusiasm.

This shows an 'egalitarian' tribe ( the *Bhils*) witnessing some degree of differentiation when it comes in touch with a stratified society. The Solanki *Bhils* (the category of *Bhilala Bhils*) or *Bhilalas* of Orghna-Panarwa imitating the Rajputs, situates them in the process of Rajputisation. Emulation of Rajput traits was a conscious means of assertion of tribal identity in the context of placing themselves as equal to Rajputs.

About the Rajputana *Bhils*, Capt. Bannerman observes that besides the *Kuldevi*, *Mahadeo* and *Hanuman* are worshipped everywhere. They also worship minor gods like *Bhairon* and *Ganp*.

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## 4.5 BHILS OF THE MALWA REGION

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From their socio-religious life, it is evident that the *Bhils* and related tribes are culturally a part of the wider Hindu society as, N.K.Bose feels, they gradually assimilated socially and culturally into the surrounding culture. Cultural traits flow from dominant groups to the relatively weak groups.

*Surjit Sinha* observes that the tribals did not resist this flow of cultural traits and patterns because this process was slow and assured them economic security and a certain degree of social and cultural autonomy.

On the basis of his survey of some *Bhil* villages, Loknath Soni finds, “the presence of Ram temple with priest... and worship of Hindu gods and goddesses shows the inclination of tribal people towards Hindu religion. *Pathwari Pooja* and *Ganga Vdhyapan Pooja* done by the *Bhils*, *Bhilalas* and *Patelias* show their connection with the Hinduism of all India spread. Many tribals do *Narmada Parikarma* and go to Puri and other pilgrimage centres. The celebration of Holi, Gangour, Diwali and many other festivals add to the colour of their social life.”

Each group tries to improve its rank in relation to others. They try to improve the caste prestige in the hope that sooner or later it will be recognized as having gone up the social scale. Adrian C. Mayor observes, “the *Bhilala* decided to build a temple on the river Sipra in the same way as other castes and to call themselves ‘*Bhilala Rajputs*’. A few Rajputs who now smoke with some *Bhilalas* may be connected with the latter’s efforts to rise.”

Scholars find a number of traits among the tribal groups similar to those of Rajputs. On the ninth day of the death-rite of a married woman, *governee* is celebrated by her parents among Rajputs, *Bhilalas* and *Chaukhariya Mankars* of the Malwa region. Lok Nath Soni finds that ceremonial relationships and ritual ties or brother and sister relationship between the members of *Bhilala*, *Mankar* and *Bharud* and *Brahman*, *Patelia*, *Thakurs* (Rajput) and *Bhils* shows the inter-ethnic relationship the exists among these groups.

All the groups in the Malwa region consider killing of a cow, bullock, dog, cat, and squirrel as a sin and a purificatory rite is obligatory if one commits any such act. Many stories are prevalent regarding the origin of the *Bhil* and related tribes. The first one states that the *Bhils* were the original habitants and other groups like *Barela*, *Bhilala*, *Darbar*, *Patelia*, *Tadvi* and *Mankar* have emerged from it due to interaction and marital relation with the Rajputs, Patels etc. It is said that the Rajputs who married *Bhil* women lost caste and formed new groups that included the families of those *Bhil* chiefs who had married their daughters to them.

Secondly, it can also be said that *Bhil*, *Barela*, *Bhilala*, *Patelia* and *Mankas* are separate groups and they are all undergoing changes.

Evidently there has been a subsequent development of these groups in a single line. The *Bhils* are in the lowest position. There exist many similarities with the *Barelas*. Both of them practise *Bhajro/Rajibaji* (marriage through a middle man) or *Bhagadi* (marriage by elopement) types of marriage. According to Stiglmayr, *Barelas* are known as lesser *Bhilalas*. The *Bhilalals* used to be similar to the *Bhils* in dress, behaviour and food habits. Cases of leaving the in first wife and going for a second marriage are also common among the Thakurs (Rajputs) like among *Bhils* and related tribes. All these groups use a ceremonial bow in a marriage ritual during *Var-Pookhana* (worship of the groom).

It is found that the *Barelas* are above the *Bhils* and the *Bhilalas* are just above the *Barelas*. The *Bhilalas* are related to the *Darbars* (*Darbar Bhilalas*) and the *Darbars* claim to be Rajputs. All this brings us to the point that the *Bhilalas* were the *Bhil* chiefs and immigrant Rajputs who formed marriage alliances and came to be known as *Bhilala*. Some of them received *Jagirs* and had relations with the Rajput chiefs and became known as *Darbars*. The title of *Darbar* is common to *Bhilala*

and *Thakurs* (Rajputs) in many areas. Now, these *Darbar Bhilalas* are in the process of establishing themselves as Darbar Rajputs and consequently earn a Rajput identity for themselves.

It is also obvious that due to the cultural context and interaction among these groups, a process of value refinement and modification in customs is going on. Thus some of them claim to be Rajputs owing to the trend of upward mobility.

As the Darbar *Bhilalas* were rulers and had marital relations with Rajputs, some families amongst them have taken brides from the Rajputs of Gujarat and other areas though they do not have such relations with local Rajputs. Some of the Sarbar *Bhilalas*' daughters have been married into *Bhilala* families, the Darbar *Bhilalas* are claiming to be Rajputs while the *Bhilalas* are claiming that they are Darbar *Bhilalas* with the spread of the area of *Roti-Beti Sambandh*. Eating together and nuptial relations with many families has been successfully used to achieve the position of Rajputs. Every group is thus trying to attain the next ascending position. Owing to the trend among them for adopting names of Rajput clans, the *Bhils*, *Barelas*, *Bhilalas* use 'Singh' as their surnames.

While on the one hand, the *Bhilalas* are striving to achieve the status of the Rajputs, on the other, *Patelias* are reforming their customs and trying to adopt Brahminical values. In this way, they are in the process of constructing a more satisfying (for themselves) culture.

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#### 4.6 CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF *BHILS* OF SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN THROUGH *BHAGAT* MOVEMENT

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The *Patelias* have tried to elevate their position through a *Bhagat* (messianic) movement. A section of them named *Bhagat* has stopped taking bride-price, drinking liquor, non-vegetarian food and has abandoned the practice of animal sacrifice to the local deities. *Bhagatism* also imparts some universal traits of behavioural patterns to its adherents which raise the morale of the members of the tribe. The *Bhagat Bhils* gave up their animistic cult; they discarded idolatry and polytheism and discarded their beliefs in ghosts, *Bhopas* and other superstitions. They rejected liquor and meat; abjured theft, robbery and killing of animals and condemned adultery and deception. They wore a rosary of *rudrakash* and a saffron turban and started bathing daily. In the social strata, they claimed equal status with the upper castes. As a result of this, the *Bhagat Bhils* found it difficult to continue their relations with the non-*Bhagat Bhils* who were non-vegetarians and consumed liquor regularly. Thus the *Bhagats* formed an endogamous group within their tribal fold.

The Bhagat Movement led by Goru Govindgiri made its presence felt during 1907-1931 among the *Bhil* population of the states of Dungapur and Banswara in Southern Rajasthan. The peasantization of the *Bhils* had imitated a process of their Sanskritization and assimilation into Hinduism. Though they were animistic, they worshipped Hindu gods and celebrated Hindu festivals.

With the passage of time, *Bhagat Bhils* started accepting a non-*Bhagat Bhil* girl as a bride if she embraced *Bhagatism*.

Guru Govindgiri preached monotheism and moral precepts to the *Bhils* to convert them to Hinduism. His team of preachers consisted of disciples and *Bhagat Patels* and *Gametis*. The *Bhils* who were considered, as *Mlechchhas* initially got culturally transformed after their conversion to *Bhagatism*. Now they settled down as peaceful agriculturists, raised their social esteem to that of a cultured Hindu and were reorganized into the fold of Aryan culture. Guru Govindgiri himself observes that "the present mass (1927) consists of (*Bhils* professing) Hindu religion.....I preach them devotion and have brought them to gentlemanliness."

In the 1940s, the non-*Bhagat Bhils* also recognized the higher ritual status of the *Bhagat Bhils* in tribal society. The *dhunis* (firepits) of the *Bhagat Bhils* at present strewn all over the *Bhil* area of southern Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat indicates the extent, continuity and popularity of the *Bhagat* movement. Mangarh has emerged as a *tirtha* having shrines of Govindgiri and Hindu deities. *Bhil* devotees of the *Bhagat* cults have accelerated the process of cohesion among the *Bhils* and their transformation toward Sanskritization. The *Bhagat* movement founded by Govindgiri continued after his death through dynastic succession.

Thus in the realm of ritual and values, the *Bhils* have integrated themselves with Brahminical culture.

All the primordial institutions and values which gave a distinctive feature to the *Bhils*, are criticized by the reformists.

Stratification among the *Bhil* society is also evident. Initially they were divided into two segments - *Palvi* and *Vagdi* when the latter migrated to the plains. Further stratification came when a few *Bhil* sections got converted to *Bhagatism*. They constitute an endogamous group. The third force of their stratification can be considered as migration.

A few social, political and economic handicaps of the *Bhils* generate problems for the operation of assimilative tendencies. A separatist sort of tendency which can be described as *Bhilism* can also be seen. In this the *Bhils* are concerned only with the interest and benefit of the members of their own tribes, even at the cost of non-tribal groups. There exists a dogma 'Bhil for the Bhil.' This psyche has been creating and widening the gulf between the tribal and non-tribal groups. Another handicap is inaccessibility in the hilly regions of the *Bhils* and this physical isolation is also a hindrance in the assimilation process. Thirdly, it can be said that the tribal minds are suspicious of outsiders who they believe are exploiters. As a result, they remain unfriendly which comes in the way of assimilation.

The sexual habits of the *Bhils* are looked down upon by the non-tribals. One finds lack of sexual modesty among the *Bhil* women of the hills. They do not cover their breasts and mix freely with the opposite sex. Such practices are not looked upon by high caste Hindus with favour while the lower castes remain indifferent towards it.

The *Bhils* remain backward in their lifestyle and this creates difficulties in the assimilation process. Their eating and drinking habits are crude and some resort to excessive drinking. Illiteracy is rampant among the *Bhils* but it is undesirable that they remain illiterate. Their animistic outlook and worship of tree, river,

rock, etc is another handicap. Their belief in supernaturalism has allowed the institution of *Bhopa* to survive.

Their criminal habits can be considered another bottleneck on the way to integration. In tribal life one faces no loss of status and character if one commits a crime.

The *Bhils*, particularly those living in isolated regions and having suffered oppression and high handedness of Rajput rulers, suffer from psychological weaknesses. They have an inferiority complex due to their socio-political subjugation.

S.L. Doshi observes, "The *Bhils* living in plains have several institutions which are common to the lower castes viz. *Kumbhar, Nai, Daroga, Dhobi* and *Kalal...* Their outward modes of behaviour, greetings, body of religious beliefs and customs exhibit a sharp similarity." With reference to these castes, the *Bhil* tendencies of *Natra*, Polygamy, laxity in sexual morals and even excessive use of liquor are integrative.

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#### 4.7 LET US SUM UP

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The *Bhil*, along with various sub-groups, constitute 14.28 % (1981 census) of the total tribal population of India. Different tribal groups which are related to the *Bhil* have their own individuality, cultural distinctiveness and ethnic solidarity. As surpluses emerged, economic differentiation and social stratification developed in tribal society. To articulate the tribal social system with capitalism, the autonomy of the tribal social formation must break up and the self-dependence of the tribal society is thus broken.

There are instances of the *Bhilala Bhils* (progeny of Rajput fathers and *Bhil* mothers) and several other *Bhil* groups of southern Rajasthan claiming Rajput origin. In comparison to other *Bhil* groups, the *Bhilalas* claim a superior rank. The *Bhil* chiefs of Oghna-Panarwa claim their descent from the Rajputs of the Solanki lineage. The *Bhils* started emulating the Rajputs by assimilating into the cults of Siva and Parvati. The Solanki *Bhils* and the *Bhilalas* of Orghna-Panarwa imitate the Rajputs, thus situating them in the process of Rajputisation. Scholars find a number of traits among the tribal groups similar to those of Rajputs.

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In the 1940s, the non-*Bhagat Bhils* also recognized the higher ritual status of the *Bhagat Bhils* in tribal society. *Bhil* devotees of the *Bhagat* cults have accelerated the process of cohesion among the *Bhils* and their transformation toward Sanskritization. Stratification among the *Bhil* society is also evident. This psyche has been creating and widening the gulf between the tribal and non-tribal groups.

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## 4.8 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Write an essay on the transformation process of tribal societies.
- 2.) What do you understand by Rajputisation? Discuss the process of Rajputisation of the *Bhil*.
- 3) Why did the Bhagat movement start? What was its impact on *Bhil* society?

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