

Gods, Heroes, And the Bhils: Mapping Cultural Identity Through Oral Epic Tradition

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Abstract—This research paper explores the mythological traditions of the Bhil tribe—one of India's oldest indigenous communities. Through a critical ethnographic examination of the Bhil Purana and its oral narratives, the paper analyzes how myth serves as a framework for the community's historical consciousness, social ethics, and collective identity. Drawing on fieldwork, historical sources, and comparative analysis, the study reveals how Bhil epics provide moral instruction, resistance narratives, and cosmological grounding, positioning them as dynamic cultural texts.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Introduction

The Bhils, largely concentrated in the western states of India, represent a historically marginalized yet culturally rich tribal group. Their mythological traditions—most notably the Bhil Purana—form an integral part of their oral heritage. Unlike written scriptures of dominant religious systems, Bhil mythology is transmitted orally, embodying living memories of the community's origins, deities, and socio-cultural evolution.

This paper situates Bhil mythology within the broader field of ethnographic and anthropological research, assessing its relevance not only as folklore but as a profound system of social knowledge, ecological understanding, and cultural resistance.

Historical Context

The Bhils are believed to be among the earliest settlers of the Indian subcontinent. Ancient Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* make mention of forest-dwelling tribes like the Nishadas and Bhils. Colonial ethnographers such as G.A. Grierson and Verrier Elwin documented aspects of Bhil life, often through the lens of Eurocentric biases, though their work remains valuable in reconstructing early Bhil history. Under British rule, Bhils were classified as a “criminal tribe,” a label that reflected colonial anxiety over their resistance rather than objective anthropological evidence. In the post-independence era, constitutional recognition has improved their visibility, but socio-economic exclusion continues.

The Role of Myth in Bhil Society

For the Bhils, myth is not only a source of religious belief but a blueprint for ethical living, social behavior, and historical orientation. Mythological narratives are enacted in rituals and festivals such as the Dev Mogra fair, and are preserved through the storytelling of *Badwas* (ritual specialists), musicians, and village elders. These myths encode values of kinship, justice, resistance, and cultural pride.

2. OVERVIEW OF BHIL MYTHOLOGY

Key Figures and Motifs

- Raja Pantha: Central divine reformer and cultural hero.

- Vina Deo: Warrior-companion embodying tactical wisdom.
- Gimb: Embodiment of moral perseverance and youthful righteousness.

Themes include divine births, civilizational missions, mythic geography, marriage as social order, and spiritual triumphs over moral deviance. These narratives are dynamic, reflecting adaptations to socio-historical change.

Oral Transmission and Regional Variants

While the core narrative remains intact, regional variations abound. Stories are shared during religious festivals, family ceremonies, and in everyday conversation. Such transmission ensures a living tradition, constantly reaffirmed and updated.

3. THE BHIL EPIC: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL MESSAGE

Gimb's Quest and the Civilizing Mission

Gimb's journey represents the thematic and emotional core of the epic. His denial of a destined wife sets him on a transformative quest across fantastical realms, each symbolizing a moral or cultural dysfunction. These lands are not mere allegories—they represent real anxieties, social critique, and aspirational ethics.

Conflict and Reformation

The protagonists—Raja Pantha, Vina Deo, and Gimb—confront societies where ethical norms have broken down. They reform these worlds by teaching agriculture, family structure, and gender roles, thus enacting a civilizing mission that parallels Bhil self-identity as bearers of justice and order.

Resolution and Marriage

Gimb's eventual marriage to Mohlobai, against the will of tyrannical rulers, signifies both personal and communal victory. It is a symbolic restoration of moral order, made possible through divine strategy, kinship support, and ethical clarity.

4. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL REFORM IN BHIL MYTHOLOGY

Kinship and Marriage

Bhil myths place high importance on family alliances, especially cross-cousin marriages. Deviant sexual behavior, as seen in foreign lands within the epic, is consistently condemned and corrected. Marriage is

portrayed not just as a personal union, but as a community-sanctioned ethical arrangement.

Social Ethics and Justice

The Bhil Purana functions as a charter for community values—justice, honesty, courage, and collective welfare. The protagonists are portrayed as ethical reformers rather than conquerors, emphasizing transformation over subjugation.

Historical Memory and Resistance

Narratives involving oppression, exile, and divine justice serve as historical memory for Bhil struggles against marginalization. These myths become instruments of psychological resistance and cultural endurance.

5. RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM, RITUAL PRACTICE, AND COSMOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Pantheon and Divine Hierarchies

The Bhil pantheon is localized yet comprehensive. Gods such as Raja Pantha and Pandhar Mata are seen not only as supernatural beings but as ancestral figures who guide moral behavior and protect the tribe.

Ritual Possession and Oral Authority

During festivals, mediums are believed to be possessed by deities, providing divine counsel. Such rituals validate the myths and confer authority on those who preserve them.

Mythic Geography and Ecology

The mythic map includes rivers, forests, demon lands, and divine mountains. Many real-world locations such as Dev Mogra are sacralized through myth, making landscape a critical element of Bhil cosmology.

6. PRESERVATION, TRANSMISSION, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Oral Custodians and Ritual Experts

Storytellers, elders, and ritual specialists play central roles in sustaining mythology. They function as cultural historians, moral educators, and community leaders.

Modern Challenges and Cultural Revival

Globalization, ecological degradation, and educational marginalization pose serious threats. However, Bhil youth and cultural activists are increasingly recording oral histories, archiving performances, and advocating for cultural preservation.

Comparative and Scholarly Engagement

Bhil mythology invites comparison with African tribal epics, Native American storytelling, and South Asian Adivasi narratives. Academic engagement should prioritize collaborative, community-led research methods to avoid extractive scholarship.

7. CONCLUSION AND SCHOLARLY OUTLOOK

Bhil mythology stands as a living testament to the tribe's historical resilience, ethical imagination, and cosmological vision. It provides not only spiritual meaning but a social philosophy, ecological ethics, and a blueprint for justice. In a time of cultural homogenization, preserving and honoring Bhil myths is a crucial scholarly, ethical, and political task.

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