

## Reconstruction of the Ethnic Identity of the Tribal of Southern Rajasthan: documentation & Translation of their Oral Literature

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One phenomena inherent in the nature of the plural society of India is the coexistence, often in a narrow space, of populations varying greatly in the level of material and intellectual development. Confrontation and eventual harmonization are the two possible outcomes of such a state of affairs and this study focuses on the social problems created by the mounting influenced of economically advanced and politically powerful groups on autochthonous societies which persisted until recently in an archaic and in many respects primitive life-style. A full understanding of the disruption caused by this impact within the whole fabric of tribal life cannot be gained from generalizations embracing the totality of the fifty sixty million tribal populations. The diversity of ethnic groups and cultural conditions is so great that such an approach seems impractical, and it is for this that the present study aims to concentrate on one such micro society. The Bhils of southern Rajasthan with its particular problems cognate to the process of social change.

In order to assess their 'difference', their literature must be consolidated and translated for their real worth to be understood and their facelessness to be mitigated. They have to be respected for their separateness and for this their intrinsic worth can only be reached through their oral literature. This study would like to document hither to uncollected literature and translate it for a better understanding of their community.

The construct, ethnic identity, can best be understood through an examination of its etymological origins. The term *ethnic* has Latin and Greek origins – *ethnicus* and *ethnikas* both meaning nation. It can and has been used historically to refer to people as heathens. *Ethos*, in Greek, means custom, disposition or trait. *Ethnikas* and *ethos* taken together therefore can mean a band of people (nation) living together who share and acknowledge common customs. The second part of the construct, *identity*, has Latin origins and is derived from the word *identitas*; the word is formed from *idem* meaning *same*. Thus, the term is used to express the notion of sameness, likeness, and oneness. More precisely, identity means “the sameness of a person or thing at all times in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Combining the definitions and interpretations of identity and ethnicity it can be concluded that they

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mean, or imply, the sameness of a band or nation of people who share common customs, traditions, historical experiences, and in some instances geographical residence. At one level of interpretation the combined definition is sufficient to capture the manner in which the identity is generally conceptualized and used to understand ethnocultural influences on its formation and development. At another level identity is almost synonymous with ethnicity prompting some sociologists like Herbert Gans (2003) to suggest that identity is no longer a useful term. Additionally, because of its increasing popularity identity is rapidly becoming a cliché and therefore more and more difficult to understand (Gleason, 1996).

Typically, ethnic identity is an facilitative construct, where an individual is viewed by themselves and by others as belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural group. An individual can choose to associate with a group especially if other choices are available (i.e., the person is of mixed ethnic or racial heritage). Affiliation can be influenced by racial, natal, symbolic, and cultural factors (Cheung, 1993). Racial factors involve the use of physiognomic and physical characteristics, natal factors refer to "homeland" (ancestral home) or origins of individuals, their parents and kin, and symbolic factors include those factors that typify or exemplify an ethnic group (e.g., holidays, foods, clothing, artifacts, etc.). Symbolic ethnic identity usually implies that individuals choose their identity, however to some extent the cultural elements of the ethnic or racial group have a modest influence on their behavior (Kivisto & Nefzger, 1993).

Yuet Cheung (1993) defines ethnic identification as "the psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage" (p. 1216) and thus centers the construct in the domain of self-perception. Sawiti Saharso (1989), extends the definition to include social processes that involve one's choice of friends, selection of a future partner, perception of their life-chances, and the reactions of others in one's social environment. Both definitions involve boundaries where one makes a distinction between "self" and "other." Saharso's definition extends the "others" boundary to include an attribution component. An individual may strongly identify psychologically with an ethnic group, however, the strength and authenticity of the identity is contingent on the acceptance and acknowledgment of "ingroup" and "outgroup" members. Saharso's definition is consistent with the writings of the sociologist, Fredrik Barth (1969), who argued that ethnic identity was a means to create boundaries that enabled a group to distance themselves from one another. Barth was quite forceful about his position as he strongly maintained that ethnic boundaries define a group and not the "cultural stuff that encloses it" (Sollars, 1996, p. xxii).

The psychologist, Jean Phinney (1990), notes that there are "widely discrepant definitions and measures of ethnic identity, which makes generalizations and comparisons across studies difficult and ambiguous" (p.500). Currently, the most widely used definition of the construct in psychology is the one developed by Phinney (1990, 2000, 2003). She maintains, that, "ethnic identity is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group" (2003, p. 63). From her perspective one claims an identity within the context of a subgroup that claims a common ancestry and shares at least a similar culture, race, religion, language, kinship,

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or place of origin. She goes on to add that, "Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity, with in the large (sociocultural) setting" (2003, p. 63).

Phinney (1990, 2000) views subjective identity as a starting point that eventually leads to the development of a social identity based on ethnic group membership. The cross-cultural psychologist Peter Weinreich (1986) not only views self-identity as a starting point, he believes that identity formation and development refers to different identity states where different social contexts will influence the identity state and one's actions. He asserts that "one's identity as situated in a specific social context is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal in which how one construes oneself in the situated present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future." Moreover, Weinreich maintains that ethnic self-identity is not a static process but one that changes and varies according to particular social contexts. Individuals, for example, may avoid situations where their identity is challenged, threatened, humiliated, and castigated; and seek out and sustain whenever possible settings that favor the identity state. Self-expression, maintenance of ethnic identity, and situated identities offer promise for understanding the complexities and dynamics of ethnic orientations through Weinreich's theory of Identity Structure Analysis (Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003).

Several conceptual approaches to ethnic identity emphasize an individual level of analysis where notions of identity formation and development are linked to one's self-concept. Much of the work in this area relies on the social psychologist Henri Tajfel's (1982) theory of social identity. Tajfel basically maintains that one's social identity strongly influences self-perception and consequently should be the central locus of evaluation. The strength and weakness of the self is largely determined from our status with our reference groups and how we assess outgroup members. When ethnicity and race form the nexus of an ingroup, then self-identity will be correspondingly influenced. One's distinctive ethnic characteristics, however, can be restrictive as one may reject external judgments and opinions of their own ethnic group and in turn establish their own criterion to challenge and refute those of the dominant outgroup. Other responses are possible: individuals might withdraw or choose to dissociate with the referent thereby creating added psychological complications for themselves. Tajfel's social identity theory has generated considerable influence on ethnic identity research; some prefer to carry out the work under the ethnic self-identification rubric.

Ethnic identity is usually contextual and situational because it derives from social negotiations where one declares an ethnic identity and then demonstrates acceptable and acknowledged ethnic group markers to others. One's ethnic declaration often is open to the scrutiny of others who may validate or invalidate the declaration. Ethnic declarations embody an ethnic consciousness that is closely aligned with the cultural elements of the ethnic group with which they affiliate.

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People with mixed ethnic backgrounds present interesting ethnic identity cases as they have at least two ethnic groups from which to claim and negotiate an ethnic declaration have good relationships and are mutually held in esteem" (p. 15).

The first oblique reference to ethnic identity can be found in the anthropological and sociological literature of the early 20th century, in reference to the field study of non-western cultures. The terms, ethnic groups and ethnicity, were first used in anthropology to refer to a people presumed to affiliate with the same cultural group and who shared the same custom, language and traditions. Over the years the construct seems to have emerged through the combination of ethnic and identity and their meanings, as a reasonably thorough literature search was unable to uncover a coining author or an often-cited definition.

Reference to the notion of ethnic identity can be traced back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1808, Hugh Murray (1808), in referring to the influence of mental images on self-recognition, asserted a notably modern view on the construct when he stated, "But I think it evident that the characteristic qualities...are wholly unconnected with those external by races which are distinguished. Mind is more flexible substance and yields more readily to the influence of altered circumstances" (pp. 33-34). Writing about individual and national differences between 1830 and 1835 the naturalist, Alexander Von Humboldt, maintained that, "Language is the outer appearance of the mentalities of peoples; their language is their mentality and their mentality their language. One can hardly overemphasize their identity. People who share a common language develop a similar subjectivity, a *weltanschauung* (world view)" (Von Humboldt, 1830-1835/1985), p. 12). In both citations, language and one's mental images formed the basis of the scholars' observations about the importance of identity from a nationalistic perspective.

When first used, ethnic identity was synonymous with race or racial identity and ethnicity in general. It is likely that ethnicity was first used by the French nationalist and scientist, Georges Vacher de la Pouge, in 1896 to describe the "natural and counterfeit" cultural, psychological and social characteristics of a population, and in order to distinguish the latter from the concept of race which he defined as a series of physical characteristics (Vacher de la Pouge, 1896). Herbert J. Gans (1996) suggests that the sociologist David Riesman gave ethnicity a new and salient meaning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Werner Sollars (1996), on the other hand, attributes the earliest use of the term to Einar Haugen and Joshua Fishman who were likely influenced by the sociologist W. Lloyd Warner (see p. xxxvii) all of whom were writing about the concept in the 1940's and 1950s. Race and ethnicity were often used interchangeably in reference to both the physical and cultural characteristics of an individual as a member of his or her ethnic or racial group and the circumstances that influenced its importance. The concept of ethnic identity began to reemerge in the social and behavioral sciences literature of the 1960's and 1970's. Ethnicity, for example, is more salient today than in prior decades. "Ethnicity," maintains Daniel Bell, "is a means (now) for disadvantaged groups to claim a set of rights and privileges which the existing power structures have denied them" (1975, p. 174).

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To gain some understanding and perhaps to add structure and meaning, many are searching for long lost records describing their social histories. And from the discoveries one constructs a "symbolic identity." "If you wish to understand persons - their development and their relations with significant others," maintains Anselm Strauss (1959), "you must be prepared to view them as embedded in historical context" (p. 164). In the course of constructing and maintaining the identity, common historical symbols are identified, shared, and passed along to future generations. The symbols also can serve as a public affirmation of one's ethnic claim - clothing, decals, adornments, flags, food, language, and celebrations.

Rajasthan is home to many a tribes who have very interesting history of origin, customs and social practices. So much so that even today they are far distinct from the 'civilised' society around them. While a few tribes are medieval in their origin, mainly due to events in history, there are a few who date their origin back to one of the oldest prehistoric civilisations in the world — the Indus Valley Civilisation.

From the beginning of man's presence in the area that is now called Rajasthan, till around 1400 BC, the Bhil and Mina tribes roamed and ruled the land. The Aryan invasion, represented by horse drawn chariots and superior bows and arrows, seems to have tyrannised tribal migration to the south and the east. Pushed into the natural hideout, forests and the ancient and craggy Aravalli ranges, the Bhil and the Mina tribes survived more easily. The northern, nomadic ethnic intrusions continued into Rajasthan. They were respected by the Sakas, Kusanas, Abhiras, Hunas and others. Quite a large number of these invaders are now covered by the blanket term Rajput whose royal lineage stood upon the ruins of the Gurjara (Pratihara Empire). All too naturally, the warrior- invaders fitted the Aryan material caste of Kshatriyas which in time came to be divided into 36 Rajputs clans.

The camouflaged existence of Rajasthan's original inhabitants certainly isolated them from the mainstream, keeping them unaware of the changes. Today, they may be considered a backward people but that does not, in anyway, call for any pejorative interpretations of their primitivism.

The Bhils form an important group, which inhabits mainly the southern districts of Rajasthan and the surrounding regions of **Udaipur** and **Chittaurgarh**. The generic term, which describes their tribe apparently, derives its name from **bil**, meaning bow, which describes their original talent and strength.

History corroborates the legends, which tells about their superiority in archery. From the Mahabharata emerges **Eklavya**, a Bhil who surpassed the skill of Arjuna only to be repressed by the command of his guru. The Ramayana tells of Vail, the Bhil bandit who reformed with the blessings of the Saraswati, the goddess of learning, to become **Valmiki**, the renowned poet sage.

The Bhils gained in strength by intermingling with rebellious, outcast Rajputs who sought shelter with them. Rajput rulers came to value the guerilla tactics of the Bhils, particularly since they were at ease in the hilly terrain. Various fierce invasions could not be repelled without their active support.

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Leading a camouflaged existence, the Bhils were unable to update their material techniques and this became the main cause of their relegation to the past where they stood as brave symbol rather than a real threat to an enemy.

The Bhil inhabitation called Pal, normally sprawls over scattered settlements without a distinct boundary. In the plains, the settlements are more compact than in the hills, where riverbeds decide the space for the habitat. The headman, called Mukhi, has the final word in all matters- social, legal, financial- receiving customary tribute for his role. The usual arbitration arises over thefts and cases of abduction.

The Bhils practice **endogamy**, marrying with a narrow kinship. Their Gods like Pantha and Vina, hold a special sway over their minds. Their other deities honor the primeval needs of the pastoral society. Nandevro is worshipped as the presiding deity of corn, while Gwali is the goddess of milk. The god of agriculture is Heer Kulyo.

The Minas are not just Rajasthan's largest tribal groups- they are also the most widely spread. In the north, they inhabit the Jaipur-Sikar belt of **Shekhawati**, continuing into **Alwar** district in the southwest; the Minas settlements mix with the **Bhils** of **Bundi-Kota-Jhalawar**.

The Minas, who are proto-dravidians, were the original inhabitants of the pre-historic Indus valley civilization. They battled with the Aryans and despite their expulsion from their earlier settlements, remained a powerful militant group. The Vedas mention them as the enemies of the Aryans and the Mahabharata records their glory in the kingdom of Matsyraj. It was the Kachhawaha clan of Rajputs who finally dispersed their power, relegating them to forest and hill hide outs in the Aravalis.

According to the legend the Garasia tribals are descendents from the Chauhan Rajputs of south-west Rajasthan. From Six centuries ago, after defeat in a battle, they fled to the hills, where they mingled with the local **Bhil** tribals to become a distinct group. The tribal population of Garasias is confined to regions around Mt. Abu and the Kotra region of **Udaipur**.

If there be some truth in the legend of the Garasia origin, it is not surprising that their culture and habits have a semblance of Bhil culture where bows and arrows feature prominently, both for hunting and personal protection. However, their beginnings as fallen Rajputs give them a higher status than the aboriginal Bhils.

The Sahariyas possibly derive their name from 'sher' or jungle in Persian. Although they are believed to be an offshoot of the **Bhils**, they supposedly earned this name from the Muslim Ruler of Shahbad, since they had chosen to make their home in the jungle hide outs of the Shahbad district of the Princely State of **Kota** and in the neighboring regions of **Jhalawar**, Sawai Madhopur, Dungarpur and **Udaipur**. They have also spread to the districts of **Jaipur** and **Bharatpur**.

These tribals of the South of Rajasthan are by and large illiterate and being socially disadvantaged suffer from the crises of being unrepresented. However they have a rich and pristine culture,

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enviable folk and art forms and an immense wellspring of oral literature. This has so far neither been systematically documented or translated and this project aims at documenting and translating, some of that enormous wealth of folk songs and folk lore.

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