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Tribal Culture of Maharashtra: My Perspective

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Abstract:

Maharashtra is a state recognized for its multifaceted cultural landscape, which includes a rich tapestry of tribal traditions. Culture, encompassing the customs, beliefs, and lifestyle of a people, is a vital aspect of how communities perceive and interact with the world around them. The tribal populations of Maharashtra, intimately linked to nature, preserve ancient practices that illustrate their close relationship with the environment. Some of the notable tribes in Maharashtra include the Bhil, Gond-Madia, Katkari, Koli, Oraon, Warli, Pawara, Kokna, Korku, and Mavchi. Many among these groups maintain a lifestyle that aligns with age-old traditions, often living semi-nomadically in cohesive, community-centric groups. With one of the largest tribal populations in India, Maharashtra's indigenous cultures offer a window into the enduring legacy of these communities. This paper aims to explore the essence of tribal culture in Maharashtra from the author's personal perspective.

Keywords: *Culture, Maharashtra, Tribe, Tribal, India, Nature.*

Maharashtra's tribal regions are broadly categorized into four areas: 1) Kokan, 2) Marathwada, 3) Gondwana, and 4) Satpuda, with eighteen key tribal communities residing in these areas. Each tribe contributes unique cultural elements, including tools, musical instruments, and craft items, reflecting their distinct lifestyles. For instance, the Warli tribe is celebrated for its paintings, which symbolize various life aspects, while the tribes of Thane and Nashik are known for their Bohada masks, as well as bamboo and basket crafts. These tribes also produce distinctive jewelry, tobacco containers, and wooden items like combs, showcasing their artistic skills. The Maria tribe, particularly prevalent in the Gondia region, is known for its traditions, such as a matriarchal social order and rich oral folklore, further extending into neighboring regions of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.



The tribes inhabiting Maharashtra's forests have a long history of preserving wooden artifacts such as deities, wedding pillars, and ancestral memorials. Some terms central to these traditions include:

1. **MusaMda** – Traditional wooden masks used in various ceremonies.
2. **Chandradev** – A mask representing the Moon God, used in the Bohada dance.
3. **Khanderao** – Another significant mask used in the Bohada dance.
4. **Hichadi** – Handmade wooden combs given by Madia men to their partners.
5. **Pogagota** – Tobacco containers crafted by the Madia and Gond tribes.
6. **Munda** – Marriage pillars created as part of Madia engagement rituals.

The Dokra art, a traditional metal casting technique using the lost-wax process, is a significant aspect of the cultural practices of tribes like the Madias, Agarias, and Gonds. This craft includes intricate metal items representing animals, musicians, and vehicles, highlighting the artistic richness of these tribes.

Masks hold a vital place in the spiritual and cultural life of Maharashtra's tribal communities. Festivals like Bohada in the Thane and Nashik districts are famous for showcasing these ornate masks, including representations of deities such as:

- **Suryadev (Sun God)**
- **Chandradev (Moon God)**
- **Bhavani**
- **Ardhanarineshwar**
- **Kodhal**
- **Daitya**
- **Vishnu**
- **Ravana** – Represented by a paper mask.
- **Bail (Bull)** – Worn during Bhil dances.

Tribal music is integral to their cultural expression and can be categorized into wind, rhythm, string, and side rhythm instruments. Notable examples include:

1. **Dhak** – A drum used in Warli rituals.
2. **Tibuli** – A pot-based percussion instrument.

3. **Mandari** – A clay drum specific to the Madia Gond tribe.
4. **Dhimki** – Played by the Korku tribe during Holi celebrations.
5. **Dhol** – A large drum used in tribal dances, with each tribe crafting its version.
6. **Zamlo** – Used during the Indal festival, played alongside the Dhol and Thali.
7. **Hirobai Kingari** – A string instrument used by the Thotis and Pardhans.
8. **Ghangli** – A string instrument from the Warli tribe.

Gadchiroli, known for its dense forests, is predominantly occupied by tribes such as the Gond, Madia, Pardhan, and Kolam. These communities have their languages, including Gondi and Madiya, and uphold rich cultural traditions. Their spiritual practices often revolve around deities like Persa Pen, with dances like Rela performed during festivals.



The following art forms showcase the rich cultural diversity of Maharashtra's tribal communities:

1. Bohada Mask Dance



Nomadic Tribes Information about many nomadic tribes is limited, often requiring reference to anthropological research. Their way of life involves constant travel, leading to the development of various sub-sects.

2. The Gondhali Community

The term Gondhal signifies 'commotion,' a traditional folk theater in Maharashtra where mythological stories and legends are narrated, typically during life events like weddings or childbirth. The Gondhali are split into two groups: Kadamrai, who venerate the goddess Bhavani of Tuljapur, and Renurai, who worship Renuka of Mahur.



3. The Potraj Tribe & Self-Flagellation (Kadak Laxmi)

The Potraj community, native to Maharashtra, venerates Kadak Lakshmi. Their traditional rituals involve self-flagellation during public performances to collect alms. Women carry a small deity platform on their heads, while men dance and whip themselves with heavy knotted whips made of materials like jute or leather.



4. Street Performances by the Dombari Community

The Dombari community is known for its street performances, with young girls often showcasing tightrope walking and young gymnasts displaying their talents. This community is found mainly in Pune, Kolhapur, Satara, and Sangli, and also participates in the "tamasha" theatre form.

5. Warli Art by The Warli Community

Warli art, one of Maharashtra's oldest art forms, dates back to 2500-3000 BCE. Practiced by tribes like the Warli, Malkhar Koli, Kathodi, Kokana, and Dhodi, this art form has gained recognition in urban settings as well.



6. The Gond Community's Rich Storytelling & Digna Art

The Gond community, one of the most populous in South Asia, is renowned for its storytelling traditions. The Pardhans, traditional storytellers, narrate Gond myths and legends, often adorning their homes with digna, a geometric pattern, and bhittichitra, which includes representations of animals, flowers, and leaves. The Gond people also practice tattooing with natural elements like the sun and moon, believed to accompany them into the afterlife.

7. The Versatile Performances of the Bahurupi Community

The Bahurupi community is recognized for its ability to transform appearances and behavior to portray various characters. Their performances often include social commentary, and historically, they were popular in public spaces, sometimes serving as spies for kings.



8. The Snake-Charming Talent of the Garodi Community

The Garodi community, found in parts of Northern Karnataka and Maharashtra, is known for its snake-charming and juggling skills. The Irula tribes of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and the Kalbeliya tribe of Rajasthan, also have profound knowledge of snakes and their behavior. This art, passed down through generations, has been challenged by modern regulations, impacting their traditional lifestyle.

9. Tribal Languages

Tribal communities in Maharashtra speak a variety of languages, many of which are closely related to the Indo-Aryan language family. The Bhil and Warli communities, for example, speak a dialect of Marathi, while Korku is an intermediate language between the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian families.



10. Agriculture and Livelihood

For many tribes in Maharashtra, agriculture remains the primary occupation. Some engage in shifting cultivation, while others practice settled farming. Hunting, gathering, fishing, and livestock rearing also play significant roles in their subsistence. These tribes possess extensive knowledge of local flora and fauna, utilizing this knowledge in their daily lives, rituals, and traditional medicine.

11. Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Maharashtra's tribes have developed sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems related to agriculture, medicine, natural resource management, and ecological conservation. These systems, passed down through generations, reflect a deep understanding of living in harmony with nature.

12. Social Structure and Governance

Tribal societies in Maharashtra are often organized around clans or lineages, with kinship ties and communal decision-making playing crucial roles. Traditional governance systems, such



as the village council or "panchayat," help maintain social order and resolve conflicts within the community.

13. Religious Beliefs and Practices

Maharashtra's tribes have rich religious traditions that are intricately connected to their natural environment. They practice animism, ancestor worship, and the veneration of nature deities. Festivals and ceremonies are often tied to agricultural cycles, seasonal changes, and significant life events.

Conclusion

The tribes of Maharashtra are the custodians of a rich cultural heritage, with distinct traditions in art, music, dance, language, and knowledge systems. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and external influences, these communities have adapted while retaining their unique cultural identity. Understanding and preserving the cultural heritage of Maharashtra's tribes is vital to appreciating the diversity and resilience of these communities.

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