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Bhili Mahabharata: A Subaltern Narrative and Retelling of the Great Indian Epic Mahabharata

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Abstract:

The Mahabharata has deeply shaped the Indian social, political, ethical, and cultural identity. It's not merely an epic but a living tradition, unifying the past and the present of India. Indian Society is a very diverse society so the different ethnic and linguistic groups have their unique cultural traditions and their different versions of the great Indian classics; the Western Indian Dungri Bheel tribe also has their version of The Mahabharata and it is known as Bhili Mahabharata or Bheel Bharat. This Research Paper focuses on the Bhili Mahabharata, the retelling and distinct narrative of The Mahabharata by the Bheel tribe from Gujarat. Bhili Mahabharata, orally transmitted in the Bhili language through generation to generation, is an alternate narrative of the great Sanskrit Epic. The Bheel tribe has been singing the tales of The Mahabharata for centuries in their folklore, songs and dances but these folktales are different, unique and localised narratives, the heroes, plots, narrative arc, subplots and actions are distinct, and the characters' behaviour is more human and ordinary. The Bheel Bharat is a retelling of the great epic which encompasses the collective Indian memory therefore as a retelling or alternate narrative, it enriches Indian memory and literature through its different and unique account of the events as the Bheel tribe has known it for centuries. The characters of the Bhili Mahabharata are intensely emotional and passionate people, the storyline is different, distinctive from the popular standard version, it is infused with rusticity and simplicity of the tribal life. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the tribal, marginalised culture of the Dungri Bheels and their version of The Mahabharata, to highlight the beauty and uniqueness of the marginalised folk literature, assertion of the subaltern voices, and to analyse this divergent version of The Mahabharata.

Keywords: Culture, marginalisation, classic, subaltern, retelling, narrative, agency, autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Mahabharata is a magnificent and popular epic not only of India but of the entire world. Its deep philosophical magnitude has earned its Fifth Veda title. It is the longest poem ever written in any language and a unique cultural text. It ranks very high in world literature and epic genres. This great classic of antiquity has provided new horizons of imagination and wisdom to Indian culture and civilization. The Mahabharata has numerous adaptations spanning theatre, literature, sculpture, paintings, cinema and digital media and dance; it has endured the tests of time and is still new, fresh, relevant and meaningful. In India, kingdoms and dynasties have come and gone, religious sects have emerged, become popular and disappeared; schools of philosophy have been founded and replaced by other schools; arts forms have emerged and in subsequent eras have been overshadowed by other art forms. However, The Mahabharata has never ceased to excite its audience. It offers every individual opportunity to connect with it. G.N. Devy mentions in his Mahabharata: The Epic and the Nation:

Among the ancient Indian literature, the Vedas were and continue to be restricted to a minuscule minority of specialised scholars. Other epics and sagas in Pail, Prakrit, Sanskrit

and Modern Indian languages, barring the Mahabharata and Ramayana, are known only to audiences seriously interested in theatre. There are various forms of theatre and dance and various levels of literary expression drawn upon ancient Indian texts that relate to specific social classes. But the Mahabharata and Ramayana continue to appeal to all classes, leaders from many languages and people of all ages as the timeless literary heritage of India (12).

The Mahabharata describes a great battle between the two Kuru clans. The Kauravas and The Pandavas are scions of great mythological King Yayati, and the Rigvedic tribe of the Bharata. The cousins fought for the throne of the great Kuru Empire as war was the last resort to settle a bitter dynastic clash. The war of the Mahabharata was not just a power struggle; it was a conflict between Dharma (Righteousness) and Adharma (Unrighteousness). The Pandavas had to bear a long series of atrocities and injustice at the hands of the Kauravas, their queen was dragged to the assembly and humiliated by the Kauravas, when the tyranny crossed all limits, a great war broke out for a just cause, for the establishment of Dharma over Adharma. When Arjun felt

distraught to fight this war against his own kith and kins, great wisdom was imparted: The Bhagavad Gita, one of the greatest philosophical texts and 700 lines discourse was embedded in the Mahabharata which reveals the profound knowledge of immortality of soul, unity of soul with the supreme Brahman (Universal life and truth), illusions of life and death and the just ways to live life. The Bheel tribe get several mentions as the Nishada tribes in The Mahabharata, Ekalavya the great Archer who severed his thumb on his Guru's demand, to ensure Arjuna's reputation as the greatest archer in the world. The Bhil tribe traces its origin from the mythological archer Ekalavya, The Bhil People have their own version of the Mahabharata, their retelling and narrative. Thus, Bhili Mahabharata or The Bhil Bharat is the Subaltern's narrative of the great classical epic as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" that the Subaltern can not speak (108). A Subaltern and marginalised group cannot represent itself in others' narratives. Ranjit Guha defines the word Subaltern in the preface of his Subaltern Studies I:

The word Subaltern in the title stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford dictionary, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be

used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class caste, age, gender and office or in any other way (3).

Bhil Tribe, Its spread and Culture-

India is a country of several ethnic and linguistic groups, diverse cultures and diverse narratives. The Bhils, one of the largest tribal groups of India, primarily inhabit the western and central states of India, including Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Historically famed as skilled archers and the bowmen of India their name derives from billu or vil, which means bow. They have experienced multidimensional marginalisation rooted in historical displacement, economic disenfranchisement and political underrepresentation. They have faced colonial and feudal oppression, During British rule, the infamous Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 labelled them as a criminal tribe which led to decades of state-sanctioned torture and systematic persecution. However marginalization has not taken away their vibrant spirit and cultural memory, they have their unique culture, traditions, painting art, dance and songs. The Bheels have been singing their own Ramayana and The Mahabharata for centuries on different Bheel Ramayana that are significantly different

from the standard classical versions, and express the subaltern voices. The epic poetry encapsulates the collective memory of the societies. Therefore Tillyard mentions: “Epics by nature of their scope and placement at the beginning of a new civilisation or a new era, are seen as a statement of the unconscious metaphysics of their time.” (Tillyard, 113)

Bhili Mahabharata or Bhil Bharat:

There are different versions of the Mahabharata. It exists in over 300 regional folk and classical versions, Mahabharata is a living tradition adapted across different languages, cultures and religions. The core narratives remain consistent but characters’ motives and subplots change. Before being written down the epic was passed through an oral edition which eventually split into two main geographical branches: Northern recension and Southern recension. Different languages across India developed their own revered versions of the epic, often adapting the story to fit local cultural values.

Bhili Mahabharata or Bhil Bharat is based on the Bhil tribe’s local, tribal and cultural values, their folktales and their beliefs, assembled in 25 pankhadi (episodes), its episodes (Pankhadi or lotus petals in local Bhili language) are narrated or sung during their festivals, usually accompanied by music and sometimes with

dance. Bhil Bharat is the incarnation of Vyasa’s Mahabharata marked with unbelievable simplicity and elemental qualities and the ineffable charm of its rusticity in contrast with the standard Mahabharata.

The standard Mahabharata is a written classical text in Sanskrit with over 1 lakh verses, heavily philosophical, it represents an elite, patriarchal, and caste-based social order of ancient Indian kingdoms. Serpents and underworld figures play minor or adversarial roles, such as the serpents being sacrificed by King Janamejaya. On the other hand, Bhil Mahabharat is an Oral tradition passed down by word of mouth through generations, often sung by Bhil bards during marriages or mourning rituals. It reflects a tribal, matriarchal worldview where women hold more economic independence, autonomy and social prominence. Dhofa (Draupadi) is celebrated as an incarnation of primordial power (Shakti) and she even engages in an intimate relationship with the serpent king, Vasang (Vasuki). Vasang (Vasuki), the king of serpents is a triumphant and valiant figure who defeated Arjhan (Arjun) and tied him with a hair. The setting of The Bhili Mahabharata is infused with local flora and fauna, and geographical markers of the Aravalli hills and northern Gujarat landscape.

It differs from the standard version as it's a retelling, giving voices to the subaltern tribal society of India. Bhagwan Das Patel mentions in the preface of *The Bhili Mahabharat*:

Tribal oral traditions are based on the gift of memory, yet the sheer length of the tribal past makes it impossible to distinguish between the historical past and the mythical past. Moreover, the tribes' primary occupation- agriculture makes the interweaving of the natural and the supernatural an inevitable core of their oral tradition. Therefore myth governs the tribal memory and existence more originally than it does the imagination of caste bound non-tribal India (5).

A Tale That Never Ends-

Bhili Mahabharata is woven around some beautiful disjointed episodes. It is a tale that never ends, happening in the Satyuga and being told in the Kaliyuga. It begins with the pilgrimage of a frog. A frog set off for a pilgrimage to the Ganga River, got crushed under the feet of stray cows, its soul entered into a womb of a trader's wife, the frog was born as a charming boy, who joined services in Indra's (king of gods) court, One day, he met a cleaning girl whom he adopted as his sister and gave her golden clothes as an offering. Indra looked at the girl and got infuriated because only Indrani, the wife of Indra could possess

golden clothes; Indra dismissed the trader boy from his service and gave him a cart full of money as salary. The boy decided to spend half of the money on the pilgrimage to the Ganges River. On the way, one of his bullocks died, he requested the Sun god to help and promised him half of his money. He reached the Ganges River and drowned half of his wealth. The Sun god demanded the boy his share of wealth, and after knowing that he had drowned it in the Ganges, the Sun god cursed the boy to transform into a fox, the boy turned into a fox, the fox saw Ganga bathing in the river, he got bewitched by Ganga's beauty and proposed marriage, Ganga got infuriated at his audacity and threw a stone at him hitting his eye. The love-struck fox chased Ganga, she ran away to Mount Sumeru, and hid behind her Guru Sansankhar. Ganga expressed her fears to her guru, and threw some holy ashes on the fox at her Guru's advice. The fox got burnt to ashes, Ganga floated those ashes in the river, those ashes turned into a sal tree, leaning towards Ganga and repeating his marriage proposal, Ganga uprooted the tree floated it in the Ganges water, floating tree proposed Ganga, Ganga dumped it. One day, Guru Sansankhar came down from Mount Sumeru to the Ganga River and touched this sal tree with his chimta (tongs), Satraja (Shantanu) emerged from the tree. He accompanied the guru to Mount Sumeru, and one day Satraja made a bow and

killed a titar (grey francolin) bird. The guru preached him not to commit violent sins. Satraja requested the Guru to give him a boon otherwise he would continue sinning. The guru Sansankhar granted him his words, Satraja asked for Ganga's hand in marriage, The guru felt entrapped but bound with a promise, he requested Ganga to marry Satraja, Ganga married Satraja to keep her pledge to her guru, with a condition that Satraja would float all of their children in the Ganges without any question. After marriage, they stayed at Dudhiya Deval, subsequently Ganga gave birth to three sons and one daughter, Satraja drowned all the three sons in the river Ganges but his filial love did not allow him to float her daughter. He left their daughter at a hermitage, the house of Gargar Satvadi. Ganga went to take a bath in the sea, after creating several rows of jowar (sorghum), she requested the gods to reveal the truth to her. Some jowar rows dried up, Ganga discovered the truth that Satraja had lied and broken the promise, she deserted him for breaking the pledge, she called her three sons and they appeared but the daughter did not appear. Satraja pleaded Ganga not to leave him but to no avail; Satraja was left with his three sons- Gangiver (Gangeya), Setar (Chitravirya) and Visetar (Vichitravirya). Ganga was aware of Sataraja's unconditional love for her so she gave him her armlet and told him to wait for her new incarnation, after that

she merged into the earth. As it's mentioned in the poetic verses of the Bhil Bharat:

- She melted away in the thin air.
- She disappeared in the blink of an eye.
- The King tried to grab her hand.
- He managed to merely snatch her hair.
- Five strands of Ganga's hair.
- Five strands of Ganga's hair.
- Only a lock of her hair remained with the king (26).

Later on, Ganga became a fish in the river. One fisherman caught the fish and went to the palace of the king Rangaraja. The fish announced its own price and pleaded with the king to open it after 9 months and 9 days. The fish was opened and one beautiful girl emerged from the fish, Satyawati, the girl who grew at the king's place. Meanwhile, Santanu fell severely ill, struck between life and death, his sons enquired about the cause of his ailment; he sent them to King Rangaraja's palace with the armlet of Ganga. The three sons went to Rangaraja's palace, showed that armlet; king's adopted daughter recognised it and expressed her desire to marry Sataraja. King Sataraja arrived at the place to marry the girl and died after taking wedding rounds, he asked his sons to cremate him on virgin land. After pleading with gods, they came to know about a virgin land, full of gems, they cremated their father

there, established the city of Asanapari (Hastinapur) and returned to their city of clouds.

Gangiver (Gangaya) was devoted to her step-mother and served her day and night, it made his brothers suspicious of their relationship, after knowing the truth, they felt ashamed, performed penance and got cremated alive for atonement; their ashes turned into the Pepal trees. Their wives had sons with Gangiver (Gangeya) the elder son was blind and the younger one was anaemic.

In another Pankhadi (episode) of the Bheel Bharat, Kutma (Kunti), and Gatrapa (Gandhari) got birth from a divine eagle's flesh and its bones respectively. Shakti transformed itself into an eagle and fell on Shiva's trident to pollute the sacred penance of the seven sages. From the flesh of the eagle Kutma (Kunti) was born, from the Skelton Gatrapa (Gandhari) was born; both the girls grew at sacred dhuni. One day Kutma went to the Khanda Lake and took a bath there, the Sun god got enamoured by her beauty, consequently, she gave birth to Kiran Kunwar (Karna). As it's narrated:

- The rising sun was besotted by her beauty.
- The slanting rays penetrated deep into her womb.

- The slanting rays penetrated deep into her womb.
- Kutma's belly swelled with the child.
- Her belly swelled with child
- The child grew in the twinkle of an eye.
- The child pushed its way out through Kutma's forehead.
- Kutma's son came into this world through her forehead(30).

Kutma had to abandon her new-born and bury her in a rubbish heap so that the people would not blame her guru and his character. The Bhil mind can't perceive nobility and grand depictions; they depict the events simply and directly. In Bhil Bharat Kunti buries her son in a rubbish heap instead of floating it in the river.

Seven ascetics' divine insight enabled them to know about this incident, they arranged Kutma's marriage with Pandu, king of Asanapari and Gatrapa's with Andhraja (Dhritrashtra), king of Dhavlo Garh respectively. Seven seers gave Gatrapa boon to have seventy- eight sons and Kutma to have five sons. They gave Kutma an example of the scorpion which killed numerous insects and told her that her sons would be living images of gods on this earth; they would be valiant and unconquerable. Kutma had five sons from different gods, she invoked Yama, the god of

death and had Jethodar (Yuddhisthra), and she had Arjhan from Indra, lord of gods, Bhimjhel (Bhima) from the Wind god, Sadav from Lord Shiva and Nakro from the lord of water. One day, King Pandu hunted a pair of deer, engaged in sexual intercourse, the pair observed celibacy for twelve years and guarded the penance of the seven seers, and the female deer cursed Pandu to die if he made love, Pandu died due to the curse. Meanwhile, the Pandavas met a beautiful woman, Dhrofa (Dropadi) under a banyan tree in Kadali Forest; they took that woman along with them, married her and provided her a seven storey palace to live in. One day, when Draupadi was taking rest, her long golden tresses pierced the earth and opened the way to the netherworld, Vasang (Vasuki Naga), enamoured by the golden hair, sought out the woman with golden hair, Vasuki engaged in a romantic relationship with Draupadi and prevailed over Arjun in a duel. Vasuki visited Draupadi on every evening and left in the morning, Draupadi got tired of this ordeal, Draupadi pretended to be in love with Vasuki and being concerned of Vasuki's safety from the Pandavas, Thus Dhofa had her way, and Vasuki revealed his fatal secret that the Pandavas can't overpower him; it's Karna who can subdue him. Karna Pandava' the first born of Kutma, adopted by a childless couple, Dubla, the gardner and his wife, Mansa, was

appointed a commander in chief in Dhavlogadh, and granted the kingdom of Gokulgarh after defeating the seventy-eight Kauravas in a feud. Dhofa convinces Arjhan (Arjun) to seek help from Karana, Arjun replied to Karana's greetings with his toe and humiliated him as Karna's lineage was unknown, Infuriated Karna enquired her mother about his real parents, on advice of his adoptive mother, he visited Kutma, who revealed that he is progeny of the Sun god. Karna invoked the Sun god and got an Agan Katar (Fire dagger) from the Sun god, he went to Asanapari to burn the city down and teach Arjhan a lesson. Dhofa convinced Karna not to punish the Pandavas as they were in miserable condition due to Vasang's forced intimate relationship with her, and prayed to Karna to get her released from the captivity of Vasuki. Karna's anger shifted towards Vasang and he burnt Vasuki's hoods with his fire dagger. Vasang with remaining single hood, defeated, subdued and injured went back to the netherworld. In another episode, Bhimjhel (Bhima) felt infuriated by his brother Jethodar (Yuddhisthra)'s devotion towards Dhofa and his peculiar servile attitude. Dhofa invited Bhimjhel to the banyan tree in the night time, Bhima did the same, and he saw that the gods assembled, Kasna (Krishna) Avatar, the ruler of Vaikunthpuri also came, and then Dhofa arrived from Asanapari:

- From Asanapari came Dhofa.
- Riding on a tiger's back she came.
- She held a lamp in her hand.
- She held a lamp in her hand.
- In another she held a dagger (107).

Dhofa or Draupadi was a divine woman like her mother -in-law, Kutma, who came to the gods' assembly riding a he- buffalo. Scared Bhimjhel visited his mother and expressed his fears towards Dhofa's presence in their house, Kutma rebuked Bhimjhel and preached him to be worthy and practice Bhakti. She taught her sons Bhakti (devotion). The Pandavas prostrated before their mother and learnt devotion, singing of Bhajans (hymns) from her.

Pandavas were haughty and arrogant as they were the walking gods on this earth. Due to their improper rituals and arrogance, their father Pandu did not get salvation after his death and he was reborn as a dog, he visited Asanapari palace, the wives of the Pandavas snubbed the dog away, only Hodra (Subhadra), wife of Arjhan recognised her father-in-law, she served the dog food and informed Dhofa, who chided Pandavas for being haughty and careless, and advised them to perform Sanetaro Yajna (Yajna for peace of soul). The Pandavas went on different adventures to assemble the required objects for the Yajna, Arjhan fetched virgin gold from the Netherworld with help of

Vasang's daughter, Hirapath, who fell in love with Arjun, revived him with nectar and married him eventually, and Sadev fetched Virgin water from Sarja step-well, owned by Jal Jogni.

Bhemo brought the head of Jhalo Jhendro (Jarasandh), after defeating him. Dhofa invited her guru, Harguru, who refused to attend the Yajna as Bhemo insulted him due to his low birth. He demanded that Bhemo should drag his carriage by giving up his caste and class pride. Bhemo realised his mistake and did the same:

- Bhemo, the Pandava prince, was yoked to a carriage.
- He was yoked to a carriage.
- He dragged the carriage up to the banks of the Ganga and Godavari.
- Bhemo dragged the carriage to the rivers.
- He dragged the carriage to the rivers (161).

The Kauravas were always envious of the Pandavas and refused to give their share of land at the distribution of land, a war or Bharat started between the both groups. Balo Himmat (Abhimanyu) the valiant and courageous adolescent son of Hodra (Subhadra), demonstrated exceptional bravery in the war, the Pandavas won the Bharat, Balo Himmat died in the war along with seventy-eight sons of Andhraja and

Gatrapa. In another episode Indrani left Indra after he did not stand for her honour, she went to Kauravas and Pandavas with proposal of her marriage, they did not dare to infuriate Indra, the lord of gods, Balo Himmat married Indrani and consequently defeated the god of Wind sent by Indra.

Thematic Similarity but Distinct Narratives: The Voices of the Marginalised and the Subaltern-

Overall, the classical Mahabharata is a pan-Indian epic of dynasty conflicts, a war between Dharma and Adharma, set in the Vedic Indian Society, a complex, hierarchical, patriarchal and deeply philosophical society, the women characters act according to social expectations and duties bound with their royal lineage. Despite having agency, they have social and moral restrictions and have less autonomy. Ancient Vedic rituals and customs have been reflected throughout the great classic. Kunti and Gandhari both are princesses of different kingdoms; their royal lineage restricts their autonomy. Draupadi, the empress of Indraprastha and the Princess of Panchala suffers the worst humiliation at Hastinapur court, when she is dragged and disrobed. The characters of this classic epic restrict and suppress their desires for the sake of dynasty, politics and societal expectations. The major

characters are refined kings, princes and elite sects of the society. Either they are born in royal lineage or have acquired royal status. Marginalised people are the part of only minor narratives and allusive tales of The Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is set in the ancient Vedic kingdoms of Aryavarta. The narration moves one kingdom to another kingdom however Kuru Kingdom is the core central geographical area in Indo-Gangetic plains. On the other hand Bhili Bharat is a local and tribal retelling of the Mahabharata. The women have more autonomy and agency. Divinity is bestowed to the common people; Kutma (Kunti) Gatrapa (Gandhari) and Dhofa (Draupadi) are not from grand royal lineage. They have ordinary upbringing but still divinity is infused with them. All of them are embodiments of mother Shakti. The Bhil Bharat is an expression of the tribal people to claim their dignity and autonomy in a caste and class based hierarchical society. The merchant's son adopts a sweeper girl as her sister and bestows her with the golden clothes, he gives up Indra's service and favours, but does not apologise. In another incident, Dhofa's guru gets

Bhemo yoked to subdue Bhemo's class and caste pride. Karna releases Dhofa (Draupadi) from Vasang (Vasuki)'s captivity while the haughty Pandava princes fail. Karana reclaims

his dignity and objects to Arjhan's humiliating behaviour. Bhil Bharata is set in local and tribal locations around Arawali hills or some mythical places with tribal, local and natural setting. The word Bharat does not represent geographical and political boundaries but it means war in the Bhili language. The characters of The Bhil Bharat express their desires instead of suppressing them on the pretext of morality, civilized ethos and social expectations. Women characters are more powerful and expressive. Ganga, Kutma, Dhofa, Hodra, Indrani, Hirapath, Jal Jogini (Female equivalent of Classical Yaksha) and Dharma practice free will power and autonomy, the women are not pawns, to be used in politics, diplomacy and wars. The text does not mention disrobing of Draupadi, instead Dhofa is highly revered. Nature is worshipped and treated as kith and kin of other beings and a living entity in the text. The major characters emerge from nature and merge into nature; nature is part of their existence. They share an inseparable bond with nature, their bullock carts, cattle and camels have replaced the grand chariots of the standard Mahabharata, it provides more rusticity and simplicity to this retelling of the Mahabharata. Bhil Bharat does not contain a highly philosophical text as The Bhagavad Gita, still it emphasises on the uniformity of universal truth in the episodes Bhakti, Kasma Avatar, Arjhan and Arjhan's

Grief. Balo Himmat (Abhimanyu) chides Arjhan for his lamentation on his death and reveals that Arjhan has been his son in several lives. The episode affirms Bhil tribe's belief in rebirth and immortality of soul. The Bhil Bharat, like The Mahabharata, celebrates valour, bravery, courage and prowess, Balo Himmat emerges as the central figure in the battle and the description of battle is brief but intense. Both the epics share the thematic similarity and core values which unite the Indian cultural memory.

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