

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES OF MAJOR TRIBES IN MALWA: BRIDGING TRADITION WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES



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Abstract

Man has a dialectical relationship with the world. On one hand he has his isolated, solitary and secluded self, cut-off from his positions and preferences in the society while on the other there is his encumbered self, deeply entrenched with his associations and membership of a community and society. Thus, the questions of existence and identity are interdependent and cannot be dealt in isolation. This holds equally and in fact much more true for the indigenous tribal communities in Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh who inhabit a particular region and whose existence is at the mercy of their identity associated with the land they inhabit. As such, these communities do not discount in any way the importance of their land, culture, heritage and communal bonds. As per the Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh, economy of about 95 lakh tribals is inextricably linked with forests. The indigenous cultural practices of these communities are shaped in such a way that they conserve, protect as well as nurture the habitat they are dependent upon. In simple words, their practices are more conservatory and protective than being exploitative unlike their so-called mainland and non-tribal fellows. Despite the invaluable worth these traditional knowledgeable practices hold, there have been few meagre attempts for their identification, acknowledgment and appreciation and also, no sincere initiatives to inculcate this precious wisdom in policy making for sustainable development have been noted. The object of this research work is to identify such tribal

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practices of environment conservation and protection in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh and also to find out the possibility and extent of inclusion of these practices in policies meant for sustainable development. The main aim of this research is to carve a ground for social equity and inclusivity for these communities so that they receive the benefits of sustainable development while contributing with their traditional knowledge and cultural practices. For the purpose of investigation, three major tribes in Malwa have been taken as subjects; Bhil, Bhilala and Bharela in about 12 districts. The research has been both doctrinal and non-doctrinal by reviewing the relevant tribal literature and surveying through electronic questionnaires. Due to the limitations of distance and time the resources employed are majorly secondary. From the study undertaken six practices have been identified for the purpose of this research.

Key Words: *Tribal Practices, Traditional Knowledge, Malwa Region, Sustainable Development, Social Equity*

INTRODUCTION

“To be or not to be that is the question”. The famous soliloquy uttered in Shakespeare’s words by Prince Hamlet is perhaps the most beautiful expression of dialectics of life and death that a man can investigate. Perhaps, to be or not to be is the question but being alive it is firstly and in fact more important to ask who we are. Whether we are a solitary, isolated and secluded self who is cut-off from the realities of social life and indifferent from our roles, positions and preferences in the community, or are we ‘an encumbered self’ whose true identity lies in his membership of a society, community or culture. The two questions seem to complement each other so much and so that the existence and identity are interdependent and thus, cannot be dealt in isolation. This holds equally and in fact much more true for the indigenous tribal communities in Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh who inhabit a particular region and whose existence is at the mercy of their identity associated with the land they inhabit. As such, these communities do not discount in any way the importance of their land, culture, heritage and communal bonds.

Malwa region comprises of about twelve districts: Dewas, Dhar, Indore, Jhabua, Mandsaur, Neemuch, Rajgarh, Ratlam, Shajapur, Ujjain, and parts of Alirajpur and Sehore. The tribes that inhabit these areas are *Bhil, Bhilala, Barela, Patelia, Korku, and Gond*. Among these *Bhil, Bhilala, and Barela*



form the major tribal groups in these twelve districts.¹ The total population of the *Bhil*, *Bhilala*, *Barela* and *Patelia* in Madhya Pradesh is 59,93,921 (59.94%) according to 2011 Census forming about 39.1% of total ST population in the state.² *Bhilala*, *Barela* and *Patelia* are considered related to *Bhils*³, as such the data provided in official sources with regard to the population of these four groups is combined and clubbed. Thus, whatever data is presented here includes *Patelia* group due to their close resemblance and similar status with *Bhilala*.⁴ Nevertheless, our study is focused on the three major groups of *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela*. *Bhils* form the largest tribal group in the area and are primarily agriculturalists; however, they also depend on other occupations like brewing the liquor from *mahua* flowers to complement their subsistence. *Bhilalas* are agriculturalists and are placed higher than *Bhils* in the social hierarchy due to their association with Rajputs. *Barelas* are semi-agriculturalists and mostly depend on selling of different kinds of wood.⁵ In some or the other way the survival of these groups is dependent upon the land and environment in which they inhabit and thus, these groups understand the value and worth of nature.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

As per the Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh, economy of about 95 lakh tribals is inextricably linked with forests.⁶ The indigenous cultural practices of these communities are shaped in such a way that they conserve, protect as well as nurture the habitat they are dependent upon. Despite the invaluable worth these traditional knowledgeable practices hold, there have been only few meagre attempts for their identification, acknowledgment and appreciation and also, no sincere initiatives to inculcate this precious wisdom in policy-making for sustainable development have been noted. This under recognition

¹Region-wise Tribes of Madhya Pradesh, available at: https://www.tadp.mp.gov.in/Public/Pages/Areawise_Tribals.aspx (last visited on November 29, 2024).

²Government of India, “Annual Report 2022-23”, 166, (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023).

³Amit Soni and Lok Nath Soni, “Identity Formation and Status in a Tribe: Case of the Bhilalas of Western Madhya Pradesh”, 6 Indian Journal of Research in Anthropology 76 (2020).

⁴Lok Nath Soni and Amit Soni, “The Tribal Economy in Western Madhya Pradesh: Environmental Perspectives and Changes in Livelihood Patterns”, 9 The Asian Man 66 (2015).

⁵*Ibid* at 65.

⁶Forest Department, Government of Madhya Pradesh, available at: <https://mp.gov.in/forest-department> (last visited on November 29, 2024).



and appreciation has led to their precarious condition with only 50.6% literacy rate (a gap of 18.7%)⁷, Alirajpur being known for the lowest literacy rate in the country. Not only has this, but Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in Alirajpur, Jhabua, Ratlam, Dhar (ST priority districts⁸) has further added to their misery. With almost 17.2% of all crimes against tribal people in India⁹, Madhya Pradesh largely fails to address a major issue of under-recognition of tribals and identification of their glorified cultural practices that are inextricably linked with their identity and for that matter their very survival. Moreover, despite constituting around 7-8% of voters among the 21% of ST population, the communities of *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* are highly under-represented in political sphere which discounts their say in major policy decisions that are meant for the development of these communities.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

1. To identify the practices for environmental conservation and protection of *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* in Malwa region.
2. To find out the potential policy-interventions that can reconcile tradition with sustainable development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the practices for environmental conservation and protection of *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* in Malwa region?
2. What are the potential policy-interventions that can reconcile tradition with sustainable development?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research has been primarily secondary with the review of previous research works in journals, newsletters, books and other publications; however, primary data from government resources is cited to support the argumentation in the paper. Also, a major source of information has been the electronic survey and a personal telephonic interview that was undertaken to complement the research.

⁷Supra note 2 at 151.

⁸*Ibid* at 162.

⁹*Ibid* at 48.



I. Electronic Survey Report

Total 9 questions including the open-ended questions were prepared for the survey (in both Hindi and English), for which we received 28 responses from the respondents.

Table 1 – Electronic Survey Questions

S.NO.	QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
1	नमस्ते! क्या आप भील, भिलाला, या भरेला जनजाति से सम्बंध रखते हैं? Hello! Do you belong to the <i>Bhil</i> , <i>Bhilala</i> , or <i>Bharela</i> tribe?	• Yes • No
2	क्या आप वर्तमान में (या मूल रूप से) मालवा क्षेत्र में रहते हैं? Do you currently (or originally) live in the Malwa region?	• Yes • No
3	आपके अनुरूप भील, भिलाला, या भरेला जनजाति की कौन-कौन सी प्रथाओं या अभ्यासों से प्रत्यक्ष तौर पर पर्यावरण और उसकी सुरक्षा एवं संरक्षण पर प्रभाव पड़ता है? Which specific practices or customs of the <i>Bhil</i> , <i>Bhilala</i> , or <i>Bharela</i> tribes directly impact the environment and its protection and conservation, according to your understanding?	(Open-ended)
4	प्रश्न क्रमांक 3 के उत्तर में बताई गई प्रथाओं से किस तरह पर्यावरण और उसकी सुरक्षा एवं संरक्षण पर प्रभाव पड़ता है विस्तार में बताएं? Please elaborate on how the practices mentioned in the answer to question number 3 impact the environment, its protection, and conservation.	(Open-ended)
5	कौनसी प्रथाओं को राष्ट्रीय एवं राज्य पर्यावरण संबंधी नीतियों में आधिकारिक तौर पर शामिल करना चाहिए? Which practices should be officially included in national and state environmental policies?	(Open-ended)
6	सरकारों द्वारा समय-समय पर जनजाति एवं उनकी प्रथाओं संबंधित संरक्षण और बढ़ावा देने वाली कौनसी नीतियां बनाई गईं?	(Open-ended)



	What policies have governments implemented from time to time to protect and promote tribes and their customs?	
7	नीतियों के फलस्वरूप भील, भिलाला, या भरेला जनजाति को सतत विकास (स्थायी विकास) के रूप में किस तरह फायदा पहुंचा है? How have the <i>Bhil</i> , <i>Bhilala</i> , or <i>Barela</i> tribes benefited from sustainable development as a result of policies?	(Open-ended)
8	पर्यावरण संरक्षण और सुरक्षा के लिए उपयोगी प्रथाओं को आज भी पूर्ण रूप से राज्य और समाज द्वारा नहीं अपनाए जाने के पीछे के क्या कारण हो सकते हैं? What could be the reasons behind why practices beneficial for environmental protection and safety are still not fully adopted by state and society?	(Open-ended)
9	आपके स्वविवेके से हमें कुछ सुझाव जरूर दीजिए? Please give us some suggestions based on your own judgment.	(Open-ended)

Response Analysis:

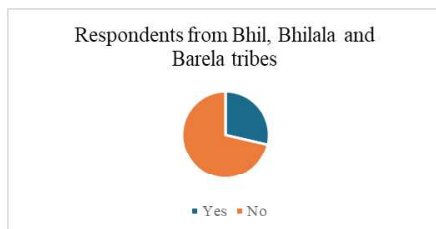


Fig 1 - Respondents from *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* tribes

- Out of the 28 responses 8 were recorded to be from concerned groups that forms 29% of the responses. Owing to the meagre amount of the responses from subject groups we have complemented our information from the personal interview and previous research works related to the concerned groups.

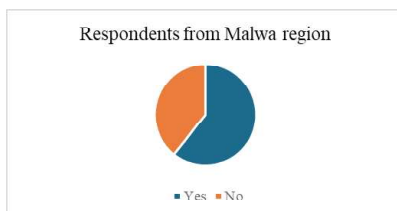


Fig 2 – Respondents from Malwa region



- Out of the 28 responses 17 are to be recorded from Malwa which forms majority of the responses and hence, form a crucial source of identifying challenges and possible solutions for our research.
- The practices that were reported include *Halma*, Medicinal Plants, *Matavan* (or sacred groves), Cultural taboos, Wildlife conservation, Jhum cultivation, Water management and keeping alive of kitchen fire. The secondary resources that were resorted to identify these practices confirm the prevalence of *Halma*, Medicinal Plants, *Matavan* and Cultural taboos.
- The overall account could be summarized as a wholesome conservational approach by the concerned groups that include land, soil, water, and forest and wildlife conservation.
- Biodiversity conservation, Community participation, Research and innovation, Promotion of use of forest produce, Organic farming, Community pledge and Traditional water conservation are major areas that were recorded.
- The recorded answers mentioned - Tribal Museum in Bhopal, Community Radio Centres, Nodal ministry for tribal welfare, Integrated Tribal Development Program (ITDP), Tribal Sub-plan (TSP), National Tribal Policy 2006 and Madhya Pradesh State Forest Policy 2005.
- Some major areas were identified in which the groups have been benefitted out of policies like education, health, cultural preservation and land rights.
- The major reasons recorded include cultural and behavioural barriers, global dependencies, weak enforcement, lack of awareness, perception as habitual offenders, alcoholism and increasing consumerism.
- The common answers were - community engagement, women and youth empowerment, cultural promotion, education and skill development and increasing tribal representation in public spheres.

II. Key Takeaways from Personal Interview

A personal interview has been undertaken with an individual who belongs to one of the subject group. The name and identity of the interviewee has been used (consent has been duly taken) to authenticate and validate the source of the information used in our research. Owing to the language barriers the interview has been conducted in Hindi and best possible attempts have been taken to translate in English (The transcript of the interview is attached as an Appendix at the end of the paper).



The following are key takeaways from the interview:

- There are no significant differences among the subject groups. Certain groups consider superior than others and do not intermarry with the inferior ones.
- These groups firmly believe in divinity of nature and thus its worship forms an indispensable part of their culture. This belief fosters a deep connection with and respect for nature, ensuring its preservation and sustainable use.
- There are various practices that reflect this pristine bond with nature like Tree Adoption. For instance, Peepal tree by Ninamas, Mango tree by Bhabhar group, and the Jamun tree by Amliyars. Once a tree is adopted, it is neither cut nor burned, and we ensure that no one else does so either.
- The notable tradition among the tribal communities of the Malwa region is the *Halma* practice. In this tradition, members of the community come together to help someone in need, whether within their own village or another village. It is a way of self-sustained living by the community.
- *Mahua* is an integral part of daily life of these groups not only as a source of income but also as part of their customs both for consumption and as offerings to deities. But other traders or legal authorities often try to stop these activities, showing the constraints of the law, and take harsh, legitimate or illegitimate actions, which sometimes leads people to resort to criminal activities.
- Mining projects in their areas to be undertaken by the government for critical minerals for which grave deforestation has been taking place posing serious threats. These activities have met strong opposition from these groups and have become a nation headline.
- The major suggestions put forth by the interviewee were:
 - i. Recognition of the extensive knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants of these groups that has travelled from generation to generation.
 - ii. For this the government should grant patent rights to the traditional medicinemen and also could provide training and raise awareness among tribal people with knowledge of medicinal herbs.



- iii. Additionally, the government should facilitate the registration and patenting of medicinal products under the names of the rightful individuals.

MAIN FINDINGS: SIX TRIBAL CONSERVATIONAL PRACTICES

- The tribal groups of *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* adopt an approach of wholesome conservation rather than seeing environment in bits of land, water, forests etc. and as such the practices are more integrative so that the entire ecosystem including the people inhabiting it benefit and grow sustainably.
- After conducting a brief survey and a thorough review of previous researches, six major practices have been identified:

A. **Halma**

B. **Indal**

C. **Tree Adoption**

D. **Matavan**

E. **Medicinal Plants**

F. **Taboo**

- Various governmental measures and policies both at central and state level have been identified that can be instrumental in reconciliation of traditional knowledge of these communities with the proposed sustainable development policies so that they can reap the benefits of the said development while also contributing with their age old wisdom.
- A. Joint Forest Management (JFM) initiative
 - B. Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) and Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs)
 - C. 'Sankalp Se Siddhi' initiative, also known as 'Mission Van Dhan'
 - D. Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY)
 - E. National Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe Hub Centre
 - F. Environmental Knowledge and Capacity Building



RESULT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

I. Key Tribal Practices:

- i. **Halma** – The age old practice of *Bhils* of self sustenance and community participation. The practice includes community gathering to resolve an issue or problem concerned with an individual family or an entire group. Mahesh Sharma, founder of *Shivganga* and better known as Gandhi of Jhabua is credited with reviving this age old tradition in Jhabua and Alirajpur.¹⁰ Till now more than hundred trees have been planted by more than 20,000 *Bhils* and the drive is still going on in about 800 villages in the two districts. The practice received attention from then Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and even found mention in Prime Minister's Man ki Baat.¹¹ A person, a family or a group of family can approach the entire community through a *suchak* or the messenger who spreads the message to seek help from all, after which minimum one member from each family comes forward to offer his help with his labour and resources in exchange of a humble meal from the approaching party. The meal is however not a pre-condition of the work but a humble and sincere gesture to express gratitude.¹² The principle of collective effort and unconditional service to the community is what that makes the practice of *Halma* unique and distinct.
- ii. **Indal** – Celebrated as a festival, *Indal* stands distinct from all other traditional practices that are more of community affairs. *Indal* is hosted by a single family as a splendid meal to opportune the distribution of surplus of what they have accumulated in years with their labour to the community to respect and thank nature for its bounty that

¹⁰Good news: Meet the aam aadmis who were conferred with Padma awards“, India Today, January 19, 2019, available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/good-news/video/good-news-meet-the-aam-aadmis-who-were-conferred-with-padma-awards-1441423-2019-01-28> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

¹¹“PM Modi talks about Halma tradition of Bhil Tribals”, Times of India, April 25, 2022, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/pm-modi-talks-about-halma-tradition-of-Bhil-tribals/articleshow/91058907.cms> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

¹²Practicing Halma In Jhabua : A Generous Offering Of Help By The Bhil Community, available at: <https://www.mptourism.com/practising-halma-in-jhabua-madhya-pradesh.html> (last visited on November 29, 2024).



is to be shared with all.¹³ The rituals that are followed in *Indal* are worship of *Kalhari* or *Jowar* (a millet) and Kalam tree baptised in liquor distilled from *mahua* flowers, night-long singing and dancing and sacrifice of goat.¹⁴ The practice of *Indal* reflects the easy going nature of *Bhils* and related tribes while being ecologically ethical and egalitarian. In the world of wealth acquisition and accumulation, *Indal* gives a pleasant picture of humanity of shared values, shared assets and shared liabilities.

iii. Tree Adoption – The trees and vegetation have been considered sacrosanct in the tribal culture of Malwa. With intent to preserve their sanctity and ensure their uninterrupted existence different clans within these groups tend to adopt their particular trees. These are identical to the sacred groves which are worshipped in the form of cluster of trees by the entire community inhabiting a village. Adopted tree is infact particular to a clan and is considered as a family member of the clan, for example *Astra* tree by *Dindores*¹⁵. Others are *Peepal* by *Ninamas*, *Mango Tree* by *Bholdhars*, and *Jamun Tree* (Black plum) by *Amliyars* to name few.¹⁶

iv. Matavan – The forest deity *Matavan* form an essential element of environmental conservation by *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* and serve as in-situ conservation sites of forests. These are areas where the village deity resides, and such area were designated sacred by elders of the past generations and no one seems to know its date of formation as these vegetated patches have been protected by their belief system since time immemorial. There is little mention about their conservation initiatives in anthropological aspects. There are no written books on religious practices or any literature that hands over ritualistic practices to the younger generation. They believe that their Deity protects and resides in that area and watches over them, guides them and protects them from all evil and even brings upon them difficult times if they disobey the laid down norms or taboos of the community.¹⁷ The trees

¹³Rahul, “Reasserting Ecological Ethics: Bhils’ Struggles in Alirajpur”, 32 Economic and Political Weekly 87 (1997).

¹⁴*Ibid*

¹⁵Sameeta Rajora and Hiteshkumar Solanki, “Sacred Groves as Centres Of Cultural and Biodiversity Conservation: A Case Study of Jhabua District of Madhya Pradesh”, 10 International Journal of Recent Scientific Research 32212 (2019).

¹⁶*Ibid*.

¹⁷*Ibid* at 32210.



in the area form distinct identity from other trees with clay urns and clay dolls in the shape of horses kept below them and seem like guarding a shrine with leaves of canopy.¹⁸ The unwritten yet followed for centuries by generations the practice of *Matavan* speaks of the paramount value of forest conservation in the eyes of these groups.

- v. **Medicinal Plants** – The tribal groups of *Bhil*, *Bhilala* and *Barela* practice their age-old wisdom of traditional medicine through their medicinemen *Badwa* who keeps secrecy about the use of these plants. Some examples are: *Andijhara* (Apamarga or chaff-flower) for sukha rog¹⁹, *Bela* (stone apple) for stomach disorders²⁰, *Bhabdi* (elephant foot yam) for snake bites²¹, *Aak* (apple of sodom) for scorpion bites²², *Shisam* (*Albizia amara*) for jaundice, *Hingot* (Egyptian balsam) for diabetes²³ and *Saptaparni* (milkwood) for tuberculosis²⁴ to name few. This secret wisdom of medicinal plants forms a potent source of India's medicine culture that includes Ayurveda, Yunani, Siddha, and Homeopathy along with Aloepathy and can serve as a separate branch of study under the broader Ayurveda. In this attempt the recognition of this knowledge and the traditional medicinemen who carry it is the tool which we advocate for.
- vi. **Taboo** - Taboos in general can be termed as those practices that are prohibited for those acts being considered accursed associated with something that is too sacred to be violated or interfered with. These can be sacred plants and trees, community land (considered

¹⁸From Faith To Healing: Matavan, The Guardian Spirit Of The Forest Of Jhabua!, available at: <https://www.mptourism.com/matavan-guardian-spirit-of-jhabua-forest.html> (last visited on November 29, 2024)

¹⁹J. K. Maheshwari, B. S. Kalakoti and Brij Lal, "Ethnomedicine of Bhil Tribe of Jhabua District, M. P." 5 *Ancient Science of Life* 255-261 (1986).

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Sainkhediya J and Trivedi P, "Some Medicinal Plants Of Sendhwa District Barwani M.P." 4 *IJCIRAS* 34 (2021).

²³Dinesh Kumar Dahare, "Study on ethnobotanical utilization of plant resources of district Shajapur, Madhya Pradesh, India", 7 *International Journal of Botany Studies* 170(2022).

²⁴Vijay V. Wagh and Ashok K. Jain, "Traditional herbal remedies among Bheel and Bhilala tribes of Jhabua District Madhya Pradesh" 1 *International Journal of Biological Technology* 21 (2010).



as an abode of village deity), rivers or water bodies and certain animals. A recent example of such Taboo can be seen in Alirajpur where Coal India Ltd. (CIL) has won the bid for critical mineral mining in Khattali Chotti graphite block.²⁵ Although the aspirations of reduced import dependence and accelerated green energy transition (graphite being an important element in lithium-ion batteries that are crucial for electric vehicles) makes this project not only desirable but need of the hour, the local tribal inhabitants of the area has many apprehensions with regard to mining in the area owing to their existing beliefs of the sacredness of the land of Khattali Chotti as reported by our interviewee. Supporting taboos for their end of nature conservation needs strong justification for their conflict with development agendas and thus, become major point of friction with state and sustainable development. The researchers however support this form of conservational approach for both utilitarian and deontological reasons. The utilitarian reason is simply the low-cost and more effective mode of nature conservation by persons best equipped with age old knowledge of the area. The age-old belief of locals is built upon years of experiences from the repercussions of breaching the taboo, which cannot be discounted, and hence, the utilitarian calculus favors such beliefs. Deontologically, these should be respected for their sanctity in the eyes of the people following them. Thus, taboo form an important conservational practice.

II. Policy Interventions:

- i. Joint Forest Management (JFM) initiative** – JFM is a part of National Forest Policy 1988 with the objective to improve the forest cover in India. Madhya Pradesh being the pioneering state²⁶ of this initiative includes it in its State Forest policy of 2005. This initiative can serve as a potent tool for inclusive and participatory forest conservation and sustainable policy-making. Some of its features that reflect this potential are:
 - **Village level Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC)** that lie at core of implementation of this scheme. These include villagers living within 5 km radius from forests and reserves 30%

²⁵Nitin Kumar, “Coal India forays into critical mineral mining in Madhya Pradesh“, Business Standard, July 22, 2024, available at: Coal India forays into critical mineral mining in Madhya Pradesh | News - Business Standard (last visited on November 29, 2024).

²⁶Supra note 6.



of the seats for the women for both as members and chairpersons (3.10.1).²⁷

- **Preparation of micro-plans** by these committees which are then inculcated by various departments for rural development works (3.10.2).²⁸
- **Establishing partnerships** with local tribal communities for use of their traditional knowledge regarding bio-resources of that area (3.10.5).²⁹
- **Registration of bio-geographic site specific plant species** under Geographic Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 to share the benefit of traditional knowledge with local tribal people (3.10.8).³⁰

ii. **Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) and Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs)** – The Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) which is to be implemented till year 2025-26 is designed to enhance tribal entrepreneurship and create livelihood opportunities.³¹

Some of its features are:

- Promoting **efficient and equitable use of natural resources**, including agricultural products, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), and non-farm enterprises.³²
- The **Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) as the central implementing agency** for this initiative which either itself or implements through State Implementing Agencies (SIAs).³³
- **Supports the theme of “Vocal for Local by Tribal,”** aiming to empower tribal communities through local resource utilization.³⁴

²⁷Government of Madhya Pradesh, “Madhya Pradesh State Forest Policy 2005”, 15 (2005).

²⁸*Ibid* at 16.

²⁹*Ibid*.

³⁰*Ibid*.

³¹Government of India, “Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission Reference Note” (Parliament Library and Reference, Research, Documentation And Information Service, 2023).

³²*Ibid*.

³³*Ibid*.

³⁴*Ibid*.



- Financial assistance by Ministry of Tribal Affairs for the **procurement of Minor Forest Produces (MFPs) at Minimum Support Price (MSP)**.³⁵
 - **Development of infrastructure for MFP and non-MFP** value chains like Haat Bazars.³⁶
 - Tribal Community owned **Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs)** and **Van Dhan Producer Enterprises (VDPEs)** to be set-up for manufacturing to branding and marketing of tribal made products.³⁷
- iii. **‘Sankalp Se Siddhi’ initiative, also known as ‘Mission Van Dhan’** –Through this mission, TRIFED aims to expand its operation through convergence of various schemes of different ministries and departments and launch various tribal development programmes in mission mode. Major of them includes **Van Dhan tribal start-ups**.³⁸
- iv. **Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY)** – Modified name for Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub-Scheme (SCA to TSS), this scheme aims to supplement the efforts of State Governments for development and welfare of tribal people by extending Special Central Assistance as an additive to the State Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP).
- **Need Assessment Exercise** for identification of gaps in with regard to Monitorable Indicators such as health, sanitation, nutrition, agricultural best practices etc.
 - **Preparation of Village Development Plan** based on Need Based Exercise.³⁹

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, available at: <https://trifed.tribal.gov.in/pmvdvdy> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

³⁸“Shri Arjun Munda, Minister for Tribal Affairs launches the tribal livelihoods initiative “Sankalp Se Siddhi – Mission Van Dhan””, Public Information Bureau, June 15, 2021, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1727385> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

³⁹“Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojna aims at transforming villages with significant tribal population into model village”, Public Information Bureau, December 12, 2022, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1882862> (last visited on November 29, 2024).



- v. **National Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe Hub Centre** – To provide professional support to Entrepreneurs from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, National SC ST Hub has been set-up to fulfill the obligations under the Central Government Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises Order 2012, adopt applicable business practices and leverage the Stand-Up India initiatives.⁴⁰ It's main aim to encourage entrepreneurship among these groups and increase the share of SCs and STs in procurement by Centre to atleast 4%.⁴¹

Environmental Knowledge and Capacity Building – Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has envisaged various schemes to synergize with the Lifestyle For Environment (LiFE) campaign, the India's led global mass movement to push individuals and communities to act in way to protect and preserve environment.⁴²

- **Environment Education Programme (EEP)** a scheme under above initiative aims to provide financial assistance to the Implementing/ Nodal Agencies of States/UTs, including Madhya Pradesh, for organising various awareness programmes. In the State of Madhya Pradesh, 5,200 Eco-clubs (100 each in 52 districts) were supported during the year 2020-21 and 15,600 school Eco-clubs (300 each in 52 districts) were supported during the year 2021-22 under the National Green Corps (NGC) Programme. 100 college Eco-clubs in Madhya Pradesh were also supported during both these years. Major activities conducted by Eco-clubs include, debates, slogan writing, drawing/ painting, poster making, quiz, wall painting, action-oriented activities like energy audit, water audit, plantation, rallies, exhibition, waste segregation, cleanliness drive, etc.⁴³

III. Key Challenges

Despite the years of practicing sustainability in their conservational and protective customs the *Bhils*, *Bhilalas* and *Barelas* struggle to receive their share of benefits accruing from sustainable development policies. From the analysis

⁴⁰National SC ST Hub, available at: <https://scsthub.in/key-objectives> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

⁴¹*Ibid*

⁴² “Adopting environment friendly lifestyle”, Public Information Bureau, August 03, 2023, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1945469> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

⁴³*Ibid*.



done so far we have found ample policy initiatives to bridge the traditional knowledge of these groups with sustainable development. However, the inclusion of these practices seems difficult owing to many reasons apart from the administrative ones that we have kept outside of the ambit of this research. Thus, we have only focused on those challenges that are associated with their cultural and customary landscape.

- i. **Alcoholism** – The inextricable or the unhyphenated association of alcohol (the *mahua* liquor) of these groups often isolates them from their non-tribal counterparts who resist including it as part of their culture and even some consider it as a sin. The isolative tendency of alcoholism in culture hinders their inclusion in the mainstream society which is reflected at the level of policy-making.
- ii. **Consumerism** – The easy going lifestyle and happy go lucky nature of these groups of eating, drinking and merry-making with no interest in wealth accumulation gives them the image of consumerist. They are considered to be disinterested in money-making for surplus with earning only for sustenance. This perception discounts their developmental aspirations to achieve non-traditional roles or occupations outside their culture like any other citizen and to earn a better living or get any job of his/her choice.
- iii. **Perception as Habitual Offenders** – The British legacy of considering tribals as habitual offenders reflects in contemporary society. Though the study groups do not fall into the de-notified or nomadic categories but the notion of mainstream society of considering ‘tribals’ a one and distinct group often gives them this tag.
- iv. **Primitive Agricultural Practices** – The agriculturalists within the groups still rely on the primitive practices like slash and burn that come in direct conflict with the conservational policies of the government. Practices like these, creates a friction between the two parties and resentment on the part of subject groups towards the government and its policies.
- v. **Language Barriers** – The regional language dependence and poor literacy levels of subject groups create a barrier in their bargain for their claims before government. Moreover, the expression of their knowledge let’s say for an example of medicinal plants does not get deliver owing to the language differentials.



- vi. **Poor Representation in Decision Making** – With only 5,212 PESA Gram Panchayats under the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) for 12,350 PESA villages⁴⁴ Madhya Pradesh stands with high under representation and poor local governance in tribal areas. It is only in the year 2022 that the state has notified its rules to implement the said act⁴⁵ in order to give more constitutional rights to these groups to reap the benefits of natural resources. The poor literacy levels have kept them ignorant of their political rights and thus affected their participation in democratic processes.

IV. Possible Solutions: Participatory And Representative Policy Interventions

- i. Use of ages of experience of community welfare and public works gained through practicing *Halma*. The Gram Sabhas or Gram Panchayats established under PESA Act could be established on the lines of this tradition which could be a slight departure from the formal structured organisation to keep the essence of the tradition intact.
- ii. Compulsory licensing and patenting of traditional medicinal plants and their knowledge and use under the JFM initiative along with the active interventions by TRIFED to regulate their marketing and produce.
- iii. The tradition of *Matavan* could be a potent tool in implementing JFM in the forest areas.
- iv. Under the Mission LiFE and its associated schemes the practice of *Indal* should be highlighted and to be promoted to include as sustainable lifestyles as against accumulative and exploitative ones.
- v. The concept of tree adoption could be linked with the Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana as a best agricultural practice.
- vi. The forest produce and manufactured entities out of the resources of forest should be given ample recognition and due respect including *mahua* liquor to do away with the ill image of ‘alcoholics’, so that

⁴⁴Presentation of Madhya Pradesh on PESA, available at: <https://panchayat.gov.in/document/presentation-of-madhya-pradesh-on-pesa/> (last visited on November 29, 2024).

⁴⁵“Madhya Pradesh notifies PESA Rules on the occasion of Janjatiya Gaurav Divas”, Public Information Bureau, November 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1876869> (last visited on November 29, 2024).



the groups receive their adequate share in benefit accrued out of resources while demanding respect for their culture and customs.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the answer to Prince Hamlet cannot be objective for 'being' is highly subjective. The *Bhils*, *Bhilalas* and *Barelas* of Malwa have been living this subjectivity since ages. The being or not being cannot be simply found as mere physical or metaphysical existence but in deep entrenched social realities that an individual wears as its skin. The tribal identity of these groups have been this skin that has given them distinctness and a unique standing in society. With their age-old unique conservational practices these groups stand at a much higher pedestal than their non-tribal counterparts in terms of nature responsiveness and indebtedness. The potential barriers however seem to dislocate them from their position of merit that necessitate urgent and practical solutions. Such solutions as participatory and not merely inclusive can be the only way out to maintain their distinct and edged standing. Their existence or 'being' can only be investigated with their truly realized and wholly recognized identity and that identity lie at much extent in their traditional environmental conservational practices

Appendix

Transcript of Personal Interview

Question: Hello! Dashrath ji, could you please provide a detailed introduction about yourself and your tribe?

Answer: My name is Dashrath Ninama, and I live in the Petlawad region of Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh. I belong to the *Bhil* tribe. In our community, there are various sub-divisions such as Bharela, Bhuriya, Bhabhar, Katariya, and others, among which I belong to the Ninama group.

Question: What is the relationship between *Bhil*, *Bhilala*, and *Barela* tribes?

Answer: These are all sub-groups of the tribal communities, and culturally, there are no significant differences among them. However, certain groups perceive themselves as superior to others. For instance, the *Barela* consider themselves superior to the *Bhil* and do not intermarry with them.

Question: According to you, how close is the tribal community to nature?

Answer: In our community, we consider nature to be everything. Since ancient times, we have worshipped elements of nature such as trees, water,



and fire, considering them as gods. We do not recognize any other deity apart from nature. However, in recent times, like other communities, our community has also started worshipping other gods. To preserve nature, we have a tradition of adopting trees, which is a practice aimed at protecting it.

Question: According to tribal people, how justified is it to consider nature as God?

Answer: Tribal people firmly believe that considering nature as God is completely justified. For them, nature is the foundation of life, and they regard its elements - trees, water, and fire as divine. This belief fosters a deep connection with and respect for nature, ensuring its preservation and sustainable use.

Question: Explain in detail the tradition of tree adoption by tribal people.

Answer: In our community, the practice of adopting trees is considered both a social and religious responsibility. Different groups within the community adopt specific types of trees and worship them. For instance, we Ninama have adopted the Peepal tree, the Bhabhar group has adopted the Mango tree, and the Amliyar group has adopted the Jamun tree. Once a tree is adopted, it is neither cut nor burned, and we ensure that no one else does so either. This tradition plays a crucial role in protecting trees and fostering a sustainable relationship with nature.

Question: Can you tell us about any specific social tradition?

Answer: One notable tradition among the tribal communities of the Malwa region is the *Halma* practice. In this tradition, members of the community come together to help someone in need, whether within their own village or another village. They ensure that no individual or family facing difficulties is left alone and provide all possible assistance. For instance, they support bereaved families or work collectively to arrange water resources for a village. Through this practice, some villages have undertaken activities like collective tree plantation to create small forests and the construction of small ponds. This tradition has been recognized and honored by the honorable Prime Minister as well.

Question: How important is *Mahua* for the tribal community of Malwa?

Answer: *Mahua* is an integral part of our daily life because it is a source of income for us. We can easily collect it and sell it in the market, and sometimes, we even make liquor from it, which we sell for good prices. However, it has also become a part of the tribal way of life. Consuming



Mahua liquor is a part of our life, and it is used in religious ceremonies to offer to deities. But other traders or legal authorities often try to stop these activities, showing the constraints of the law, and take harsh, legitimate or illegitimate actions, which sometimes leads people to resort to criminal activities.

Question: What steps should the government take regarding *Mahua*?

Answer: The government could create certain regulations and allow specific tribal communities to sell *Mahua* and its liquor while adhering to these rules. This would provide the tribal people with a source of income, and all activities would be monitored under the law. Recently, the state government has been considering promoting *Mahua* from a commercial perspective, separate from liquor, for the tribal population. This would help raise awareness and encourage people to manage and trade *Mahua* correctly under government guidance.

Question: What challenges are tribal communities currently facing, according to you?

Answer: Presently, in Alirajpur district, private and government companies, in collaboration with the Indian government, are planning to undertake industrial activities in tribal areas. They intend to dig mines to extract metals used in batteries, which could lead to the cutting down of millions of trees. This poses a serious threat to the destruction of small and large forests in the region and raises the likelihood of severe environmental pollution in the future.

As I mentioned earlier, tribal people worship trees as gods and consider nature as divine. They strongly oppose this activity and are unwilling to let it happen. Their protest has gained attention at the national level. This issue highlights the clash between industrial development and the preservation of the environment and cultural beliefs of tribal communities.

Question: What should the government do for tribal communities in other areas?

Answer: One of the most remarkable aspects of tribal communities is their deep connection with nature, which has led to their extensive knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants over thousands of years. This knowledge benefits society as a whole, as tribals can treat serious illnesses using herbal remedies made from flowers and leaves. They also sell these remedies in villages and cities.



Despite this, their contribution and expertise in this field are not recognized, nor do they receive adequate benefits. Often, experts take herbs from tribal people, sell them in the market at higher prices, or even get them patented under their own names in the medical field.

The government can take strict measures to address this issue by providing training and raising awareness among tribal people with knowledge of medicinal herbs. Additionally, the government should facilitate the registration and patenting of medicinal products under the names of the rightful individuals.