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## **GODS AS MONOLITHS: A NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION OF WOODEN POST ERECTION AMONG THE BHILS OF CHHOTA UDEPUR**

### ***Abstract***

*The articulation of sacred symbols and belief systems is a culture-specific phenomenon. One of the ways in which the Bhils of Chhota Udepur express their connection to Gods is through the erection of wooden and stone posts followed by animal sacrifices. For a Bhil wooden post echoes their history, their relationship with nature, and the ethos on which they conduct their life. The cultural values, the attitude and wellbeing reverberate around a central theme: wooden posts operating as a functional centrifugal organic culture, a derivative of their given environment. This ethnographic study of the monoliths of Rathwa Bhils would try to show how these geometrical entities serve as the gathering point around which the identity of Rathwa Bhils is constructed. This paper will refer to the historical experiences of communities like Naga and Bororo to study the importance of monoliths among Rathwa Bhils.*

**Keywords:** *Wooden post, Stone post, Monoliths, Bhils, Posthumanism.*

### **Introduction**

The things that look so obvious and mundane in their appearance at first sight sometimes turn out to be overwhelmingly important entities, upon which hinges a lot of other entities. One such entity, which has been widely researched in anthropology since its inception, has been the presence of monoliths in varying shapes and sizes in almost all the societies studied by Anthropology. The purpose of this paper is to study the phenomenon of monoliths erection by taking insights from the emerging field of Posthumanism and Anthropology of science. For our purpose, we have done field-based research into the phenomenon of monolith erection among the Rathwa Bhils of Chhota Udepur and how that non-human entity serves as a fulcrum or the central

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point around which the identity of Rathwas is organized.

Although the initial works on monoliths focussed on the different aspects and reasons for their erection, and analysed from different socio-historical perspective, there was another simultaneous process that went on and it was the destruction of the monoliths. J.H. Hutton (1921, 1922) and J.P. Mills (1922, 1926), who have written extensively about the people living in Naga hills, have mentioned in their works the parallel processes of monolith vandalism and successful conversion of communities by missionaries.

Anthropologist Haimendorf (1962) in his book *The Naked Nagas* vividly describes the changes in the community structures and practices, leading to vertical splits between clan members and villages, at the same time when their sacred symbols and stones had either come under attack or were abandoned. With historical hindsight, the not so obvious relationship between the stability of communities and the sanctity of their monoliths is hard to miss, and therefore this correlation should be acknowledged while interpreting the presence and erection of monoliths amidst different communities.

The paper has two primary aims. Firstly, to study the ubiquitous phenomenon of Monolith erection among the Rathwa Bhils and the elaborate processes that are associated with these monoliths. Secondly, to re-evaluate and contextualize the anthropological literature on monoliths with recent developments in anthropology of science and Posthumanism, especially through the works of Bruno Latour (1993, 2005) who argue that old divisions between subject and object are no longer valid and societies have always been populated by both humans and non-humans with varying degree of importance. Similarly, Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) argues for a new perception towards dwelling and environment where the older permanent classifications between the living things and non-living things give way to a more dynamic qualification. Ingold calls this qualification the quality of being alive, which is neither limited to humans nor permanently deprived from non-humans.

Connection to God(s), acknowledgment of dependency and sensitivity to their different manifestations are articulated through mediums of sacred symbols and belief systems deeply rooted in the cultural makeup. The Bhil community of Chhota Udepur in Western India expresses this articulation through the erection of wooden post(s), and the offering of terracotta animal figurines along with other components with an unwavering belief. These aspects of the community life of Rathwas Bhils draw several questions: when and who erected the posts? When are they worshipped? Furthermore, how can we refer to the wooden posts while describing the community that erects it? These questions will form an entry point into the world of Rathwas and their meticulous care while raising the Monoliths. Anthropologists like Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold have already highlighted the need for shifting the perspective from 'humans and their world' to 'humans in their world' and it is with these

new perspectives that we will study the Monolith erection among Rathwa Bhils.

### **Monoliths and Posthumanism in Anthropology**

Within a span of almost more than a hundred years, the anthropological discourse has come back to the point from where it started. The initial encounter of anthropology with the non-western societies, accompanied by esoteric forms of the social and religious organization, produced a hierarchical-evolutionary model of society where most of the non-western societies were placed at the lower rung of the ladder. The reasons given for that hierarchical-evolutionary modelling were prevalent practices of animism, totemism and fetishism (Frazer 2003) vis-à-vis the doctrines of monotheism.

Emile Durkheim aptly summarized the overall milieu of evolutionary framework by terming these practices as 'elementary forms of religious life'. Belief in nature, spirits and monoliths, are considered by-products of our evolved psychology (Boyer 2019) or they are termed as 'cognitively optimal' (Whitehouse 2021). In the most generous descriptions, like in Durkheim, they are given a representational value or projection of group consciousness on the totemic object (Durkheim 2010), thereby reaffirming the division between nature and culture. The non-western societies, through this division, were given a nature-like existence whereas western societies were represented as belonging to advanced realms of culture (Ortner 1974).

Based on this evolutionary nature-culture division, another theoretical classification of little and great traditions emerged, where the multiple forms of religious worship, which included elaborate pantheons and rituals, were relegated to the domain of little traditions (Marriott 1955; Redfield 1956). The scriptural and textual forms of religions, mostly monotheistic religions, were termed 'great tradition'<sup>1</sup>. The classification of little and great tradition relied on the literate and non-literate differentiations within societies, thereby relegating multiple forms of worship as belonging to the domain of little tradition. The overall attitude of anthropological discourse, for a very long period, played on these divisions of nature-culture, subject-object, and little and great tradition.

However, the advent of ecological crisis and the subsequent emerging fields of anthropology of science, especially that of Posthumanism, have challenged these superficial divisions which have tried to bifurcate the hybrid and composite reality into fixed asymmetrical categories. These times of crisis, as Michel Serres (2013) puts it, have brought the mute objects and mechanistic nature to the centre of debate and discussions. Humans live neither in nature nor culture but in collectives that are composed of humans, non-humans and more than humans (Latour 1993, 2004; Haraway 1989; Ingold 2011). In this framework, there are no representations but entities with varying degrees of agency and articulative powers, distributed among the multiplicities (Latour 2013; Serres 1995; Haraway 2008). Studies today on totems, monoliths, esoteric

rituals and sacrifices have to be re-evaluated acknowledging their ever-presence among humans as more than mere material objects, more than meets the eyes or just on its representational value.

With these insights, this paper aims to revisit the ideas of monoliths prevalent in anthropology and to examine such communities from the perspective of - monolith as a constituent element in verity. There is an increasing amount of literature that has shown how different non-human actors like Baboons, Cyborgs, and Microbes, belong to the part of the collective inhabited by humans. The present study will try to extend the scope of these collectives by examining how wooden and stone monoliths also occupy central position in the worldview of different communities.

### **Monolith Erection among Rathwa Bhils**

A general echo that reverberates across the hills and plains among the Bhils of Chhota Udepur as stated by a respondent goes:

*“Our Rathwa community does not believe in other Gods. Our forefathers have been following the religion for a very long time. This is everything for us. There is no need to believe in any other God. For us, the Devstanak is the only life we have and for our new generation. This is the only answer to our wellbeing. We do not go to the temples of any Gods or Goddesses. During Diwali, all our wishes are fulfilled and cumbersome burdens are blown away similar to how chaffs are blown away by a winnowing machine.”*

Different discourses have tried to explain this system of raising monoliths as a form of worship. There is an environmental approach vis-à-vis Lippard (2006), Krishna and Amirthalingam (2014) and Fowler-Smith (2018) amongst others. Although they have emphasized it to be an earlier form of monotheistic religions that succeeded from worship of material objects.

The second school holds a different opinion, holding it more towards a naturalistic viewpoint, visible in the works of Tyler (1924) and Huyler (1951). They argue that communities venerate their own culture-specific deity, a derivative of their natural world. Asserting on the close associations that the community share with nature- a hill, a rock, a stream or a pond (a commonly shared trait). This association is reflected as embodiments in the form of a local God or Goddess (Huyler 1951: 105).

Then, among the studies on the Bhil religion, some have argued about the religious status of the Bhil: whether they are Hindus or animists (Ahuja 1965; Sedgwick 2021). They maintain, “there may still in most cases be noted a difference between a common Bhil and an ordinary Hindu. But the difference is more of a racial or ethnological nature than a religious one, and is rapidly

disappearing (Sedgwick 2021: 134).”

Erection of wooden posts is a global practice. The usage of wood as a replacement for stone is consistently observed especially in Southeast Asia. As early as 1920s, reports are found among the Lothas of Nagaland where Y-shaped wooden posts were substituted if no suitable stone was available for a megalith (Hutton 1922). Similarly, wood as a substitute for stone is found in an undated study by Van der Hoop (1932). Other evidence are- Kima post among the Garo of Meghalaya as memorials to the dead, the Tlaisun clan of the Chin Hills of Burma as memorials to dead chiefs, *seluphan* post for commemorative purposes among the Mizo and the famous wood henge builders of England incorporating multiple purposes accommodating a variety of functions and uses (Marak 2019).

- i. **Study Area and Methods:** The district of Chhota Udepur is a ‘tribal’-dominated district in Eastern Gujarat of India. Bhils are a diversified community that dwells both in the harsh undulated hills and the populous plains. Bhils inhabit pockets of neighbouring states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan (Katewa 2017). The pressures on the subsistence economy and unpredicted natural calamities have led many Bhils to leave agriculture and chance at other occupations. The Bhils of Chhota Udepur is also an agriculturalist community, following both Kharif and Rabi crop cycle. Besides, one sees the domestication of cows and goats in every household. The authors have done field based studies in the villages of Rathwa Bhils in and around Chhota Udepur and the research was conducted in the months of December-January 2022 for the period of two months. The timings of the fieldwork were chosen after conducting pilot visits to the field to get a sense of the important days and festivals celebrated by the villagers and also the auspicious timings for the monolith erection and substitution. To get the details of the different rituals pertaining to monolith erection, detailed interviews of the village participants were conducted regarding the auspiciousness of the days and the necessary requirements for its completion. To make the vast data presentable and coherent, the narrative approach was preferred since a lot of information was presented to us in the form of stories and legends.

Bhils are known as “nature worshippers and worship natural elements like sun, moon, water, hills, fields, crops and a host of animals” (Iyer 2006). As per Chhota Udepur Population Census 2011-2021, Chhota Udepur Municipality administers over 5,294 households with a population of 25,787, out of which the non-stated religion and other religion comprise 0.15%  $(0.15 + 0.01)^2$ . The sections of the wooden post erection and worship strictly reside on the Rathwas. The current study adopted a random sampling of seven villages, Ambala, Gathiya, Zoz, Bodgam, Jambughoda, Achhala and Kevdi. Similarly, some nearby

villages were also considered for a more holistic understanding.

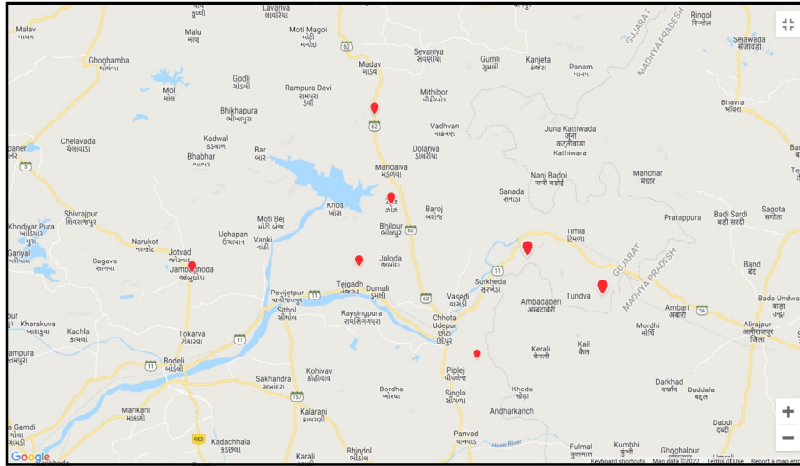


Figure 1: Study Villages map<sup>3</sup>

The religion of Rathwas of Chhota Udepur is a unique one. Tilche (2022) mentions it as a 'natural Adivasi religion', that is actively erasing their tradition in search of new religion and identity. Chhota Udepur comprises Rathwa, Thanik, Nayak and Harijan, however, only Rathwa community goes to *dave*. The village ritual is known as *Gaon Dave* and the ritual is called *Dave Pratek*. The rituals are found to be associated with the worship of erected wooden posts, offering terracotta animal figurines and animal sacrifices.

The erected posts are worshiped during all auspicious occasions, weddings and festivals. The wooden post is found in both simple and decorated forms. A separate wooden post is made for each God or deity of the village. The names of the Gods found worshipped are *Baba Dave*, *Bharma Dave*, *Chotta Bharma*, *Badha Bharam*, *Nano Kulpao*, *Moy Kulpao*, *Ai Purmo*, *Baba Tundova*, *Ai Tundvi*, *Gaon Dave*, *Baba Ratumad* and *Baba Dudhiya*.

In most of the villages, the sacred area is located at the beginning of the village, whereas in others certain Gods like *Konbava Dave* and *Maduva Devi* of Dhamodi village are located on the nearby twin hills. Every facet of an Adivasi life is governed by the right order of this worship and adherence.



**Figure 2: A cluster of wooden posts and terracotta figurines, Dhamodi village**

- ii. Sacred area, components and rites:** The sacred area generally consists of several wooden posts, either in rows or as a standalone section. Apart from these, animal terracotta figurines, *diyas* (the small lamp), *salki* (the *diya* cover) and coconuts are offered. Onset activity of the ritual entails cleaning of the spot and the surroundings. All footwear is kept at the entry, as a form of humility, to ensure appropriate respect to their Gods.

The handmade palm rope or grass rope is put over the wooden post, connecting it with the other posts. The sacred ingredients used by the ritual expert constitute newly harvested rice, sacrificial animal(s), coconut, coins, *mahua* (the local liquor distilled from dried *Madhuca longifolia* flowers) and ghee for the *diyas*. Local liquors and food grains are used to appease the God for good crops, overall goodness and progress in life. *Diyas* are continually lidded and refilling of the oil happens at intervals. Oil extracted from sesame seed, mustard seed and peanuts is also used in the absence of ghee. The separation of sacred objects from everyday objects, even that in art, had not occurred (Tilche 2022: 47).



Figures 3 & 4: The scared components at Kikawada and Ambala

Usages of terracotta horses are widespread and can be found in most ritual places. The offering of a terracotta horse is given to the God when a cow or buffalo does not give milk. However, in certain instances, the same offering is also made for someone's wish to get fulfilled. The size of the terracotta horse offerings depends on the capacity of the offeror, which is proportional to the economic status of the person.

- iii. Erection of wooden posts:** There is no fixed cycle to change the wooden posts. Soundness of the village is of utmost priority for the change. Peaceful living, sickness free and devoid of bad news is considered of primal importance. If the old post/s is/are damaged, the ritual expert becomes aware and initiates the commencement.

The change of the posts is a nine-day affair. 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> days are spent in preparing the earthen *diyas* and *salki*, monetary collection and cleaning the vicinity of sacred trees which is mostly Peepal (*ficus religiosa*). The 9<sup>th</sup> day is left for the erection of the post(s). The ritual expert, called as *Badwa*, is very knowledgeable in the matters of tradition. The spectrum of knowledge he possessed is expressed by talking with nature, interpreting the message conveyed by nature and conveying them to the community members. During the ritual at times, "(it)...causes his head to shake, his voice to give advice, his body to dance in ways associated with certain traditional personages and on occasion to climb through a row of tree branches set up in a field, in imitation of a story about a dev who goes to the sky (Alles 2013: 113)".

To change the post around 150-200 years is needed. In Ambala, the *Badawa* was approached by the new generation that they should be aware and learn the process of changing wooden posts. Narsing Bhai Badawa, a specialist at Ambala village led the erection of the new posts in 2003. He explained the genealogy, the process of installation and sanctification of posts, the type of horses to be used for different rituals and the different styles of wooden posts that can be used for installation. Jawan Singh Narsing of the same village, had erected the present posts some 150-200 years back and which were then replaced by Narsing Bhai Badawa.

- iv. Designs and symbols:** In Zoz, all the animals are decorated with appropriate colours, emphasizing on required stripes and designs for a



natural appearance. The wooden post is painted in red, white and green colours, and engraved with a symbol of the sun, moon, dots, serpentine line and geometric patterns. The name of the God was written as Sugadev. Each cluster is dedicated to a different God with names written on a board. In this village, rock shelters are also worshiped and placed with several terracotta figurines. The shelters are found with twelve human figurines, seven snake figurines and a few pots, *diyas* and *salki*.

The wooden posts from Gathiya reflect certain acumens. The wooden posts have nine sides, with multiple engravings or circles, Us, Vs, leaf and floral motifs. The numbers of terracotta figures, as well as the earthen pots that can be placed near the post is not fixed, nor do they reflect any particular symbolic meaning. Terracotta figurines offerings are a continuous process with multiple additions and thus the number does not reflect any absoluteness.

- v. **Animal sacrifice and communal concord:** Domesticated animals, goats and chickens, are sacrificed to appease and maintain the favour of the deity/deities. Sacrifices of chicken and goat are made once or twice a year. The weapons used for the sacrifice are sanctified before the blood is spread. All animals are to be well fed before the sacrifice.

Post sacrifice, the animals (goat and chicken) are taken to a nearby fireplace and are cleaned and roasted. Here, liver and lung are tossed up on charcoal and are later offered to the Gods with utmost reverence. The remaining meat is then cut into small pieces, collected in teak leaves and distributed to all the households in the village. In Ambala, as observed, the male members are seated according to the age to receive their *prasad*. The youngest participant was three years old. All the male members of the community present at the ritual receive the *prasad* and partake with joyful acquiescence.



Figures 5: Rathwa children and men partakes in the *Dev Pratek* as the ritual culminates (Ambala village)

**Case Studies: 1. Gathiya village:** Gathiya village is the epicenter for the neighbouring villages. As the village approaches, there is an endless stretch of field patches - cotton fields on the right and *urad* (black gram) fields on the left. A scenic elevated turn-road runs parallel to a stream providing a picturesque view. In this village, a wooden idol was seen placed near a house. On occasions when someone from the family dies, they offer the local *Mahua*, cooked food and rice. The human-shaped wooden idol is kept facing the east. The entry of the village is met by an outsized concentration of terracotta figurines. This place hosts multiple horse terracotta in numerous clusters and several wooden posts.

The onset of the village is welcomed on both sides by the *Pipalaya Dave* (the whole area of ritual where offerings of terracotta figurines, lid *diyās* and wooden posts are given). The right *Pipalaya Dave* measures an area of 51 feet in length and 76.5 feet in breadth. The area houses eight wooden posts (eight feet in height), nine bigger horse terracotta, 12 smaller horse terracotta and 19 earthen pots.

The left one is comparably bigger in area. Comprising 14 segregations, the largest one measuring up to 76 feet in breadth and 66 feet in length. The whole area of this *Pipalaya Dave* measures 240 feet in breadth and 180 feet in length. At the back of the area chunks of earthen pots are stretched the whole length with only a minimum of 28 feet left unattended.



Figure 6: *Pipalaya Dave* (the place of worship), Gathiya village

2. **Zoz village:** In Zoz village, seven localities were noticed with clusters of terracotta figurines. A locality situated near the village forest hosts nine clusters of terracotta figurines. One cluster is found with large to small figurines of horses, other animals and several temple-shaped

terracottas arranged in lines. Some of the animals found are horses, elephants, tigers, camels, cows, buffaloes, peacocks and snakes.

**3. Ambala village:** *Devstanak* or the place of worship is similar in most of the places. A case study at Ambala reveals certain understandings. According to the oral tradition, the chain of events that followed at the village is highlighted below:

1. Before the erection of wooden posts, Ambala worship area only consisted of a tree.
2. The first layer or the olden wood rot post was erected by Hutu Bhai Badawa, approximately one thousand years ago.
3. Followed by the tenure of a renowned ritual expert, Bhargha Badawa. He led the village at all the rituals.
4. Narsing Badawa, another ritual specialist, afterward spearheaded the erection of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> layers of posts. These remains are still seen today.
5. Juwan Singh Narsing erected the current posts 200-250 years ago.

On deeper examination, Ambala's sacred place reflects five segregates which are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs.

1. *Pidhai Badalna*: The process, simply put, is the change of wooden posts, where older posts are replaced with new ones. Around the village, if eggs of domesticated chickens do not hatch in their own time in two or three villages then similar instances are taken into account and the expert is informed about the concurrent phenomenon. He takes the rice and dal from the households, reads them and understands the cause and informs the members. To abstain from the spread, he informs that there is a need for a new post. The spread of the fury or the pacification of the God moves in degree from the domesticated animals to humans if not taken required action. Escalating to death of children, fatal accidents and death events when the out-of-order occurrences are overlooked.

The need for prerequisite timely intervention is key. The affected owner of the animal is asked to come on Sunday, he is made aware of the ingredients needed for the ritual, who should be present and the schedule is planned out. Any death in the village or accidents results in the postponement of the ritual for 15 days or 30 days. The death ritual of the Rathwas lasts for 13 days. The days are counted from the day of the event, the 12<sup>th</sup> day sees the arrival of the close relatives and the 13<sup>th</sup> day is mourned by all the members of the community. Then, the ritual (*pavitr*) can be held after the 13<sup>th</sup> day. The oral history suggests that the worship started when humans were in the form of monkeys or monkeys itself.

Animals, children and women are believed to be the first on the line. If they fall into some ill situation the Badawa or the ritualist is sought. He offers some mantra, sanctifies a portion of the asked rice and gives back, which is believed to cure the sickness. The pastoral life, their economy, or the productivity is determinant of recognising the initial ill signs and the timely treatment. For instance, if a cow and a buffalo miss the pregnancy for a year, then the next year a form of milk is prepared with the help of the ritual expert, along with two coconuts and other ingredients. The dependency on animal sacrifices reflects the utmost importance of maintaining order in sacredness.

*Kali Chaudas* (the second day of Diwali) is an auspicious day of worship. For the fields, on this day, all the species are taken to the place of worship in the basket saying 'we are having only after offering you'; thanking the God(s) for the good harvest and for keeping the crops safe. For the harvest in the fields worship is needed, then the postharvest scenes - consumption or storage, require another. Involves a lot of sacred observation in every step. The nearby villages' rituals in Rangpur, Devhaat and Katthiwada last a day, whereas, in Ambala it lasts for two days.

The place of worship is open to anyone who wants to fulfill their wishes like bearing children, jobs, good harvest, household needs, etc. The major worship and sacrifices happen during:

1. Ritual happens at *Akhadij* (1<sup>st</sup> day of the annual calendar) in May.
2. *Diwasa* in June and
3. *Diwali* in July.



**Figure 7: Tied goat to be sacrificed**

2. Gaon Dave: A ritual offering for the cow is followed by the Gumbar community. Two to three liters of milk is poured on the stone and is kept and observed for half an hour or one hour. The volume should

stand without dropping the level. If it decreases, it is believed to be inauspicious and there is something wrong with the puja. The rice is mixed with milk as *ladoo* (the blessed food). In this ritual two coconuts, chicken and goat for bigger prayers are offered.



Figures 8 & 9: Gaon Dave and offered milked beneath the stone

3. *Baba Tundova and Ai Tundvi*: This area is demarcated for unfertile parents and for ones seeking financial blessings which are observed for a year. The worship entails the sacrifice of *horse* (ghoda), *salki* and *diyas*. The ritual is different for different sexes. For female bangles, *bindi* and red colour cloth are offered. For a man, it contains white and blue cloth. Once the prayer is offered, the following year the parents observe strict abstinence from consuming salted food items and are restricted from partaking in hot food, less oil in food and maintaining as a vegetarian.



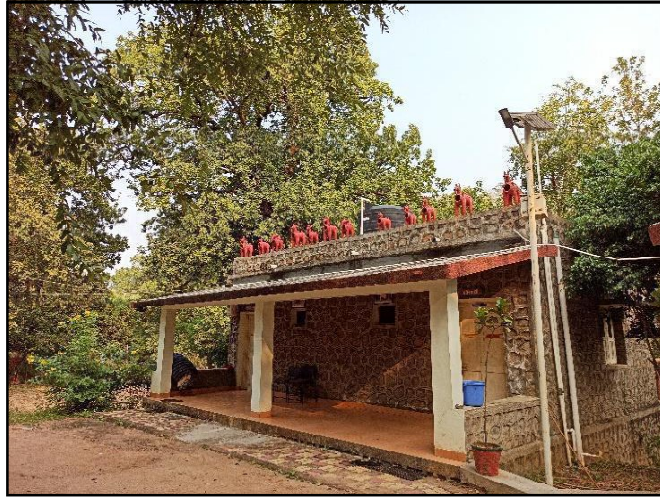
Figure 10: Sarpanch of Ambala village explains *Baba Tundova and Ai Tundvi*

4. *Baba Ratumad*: The place where the first person came to earth and survived. The highest status is given to him. In front of the place misbehaviour, mistreatment and dishonesty are avoided, and deviants are subjected to calamities to a higher degree. Well-being and happiness are sought with interval changing of the posts.
5. *Baba Dudhiya*: In this area, only coconut is offered. Five *tilak* representing five basic elements is applied on the post. These elements include water, fire, wind, space and earth, an intermediary expression similar to *panchamahabhutas* in Hinduism. Cow milk is spread over the stone. The constancy in the volume of the milk is measured as the indicator of a successful year.

**Women's participation:** The wooden post reflects certain principles, values, behaviours and attitudes. The participation of women in religious activity is quite limited. Women as ritualists is a devoid concept. The ritual expert who is also considered the healer is a well-known figure matched to the *sarpanch* (the local council representative). The apprehension, aforementioned prevails, that if a woman is allowed to take part in religious ceremonies it is considered as 'less intelligence – a traditional belief' (Wiesinger 1967: 498).

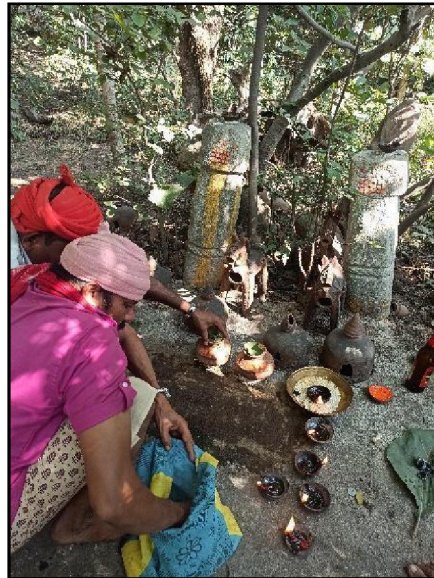
Even though the moral support and cooperation of women are not restrained, the roles played are limited and centrifugal. For the ritual women are not allowed at the *devstanak*. The collected rice grain for the ritual is told to be cleaned by unmarried ladies of the village (the virgins). At a certain level, there exist ample signs of the concept of purity and pollution intrinsically. Similarly, the role of the women is delimited to the hospitality of guests if any, preparation of food and winemaking.

**Transculturation:** One of the fluctuations that were noticed is in the sacred place of the horse. Over time, the place of the terracotta horse has extended beyond the place of worship. Acknowledging the aesthetic value, it is now seen used as a decorative item in houses. The price of which ranges from 200 - 1,500.



**Figure 11: Horse terracotta as decorative items at Kevdi Eco-tourism campsite**

Now, a magisterial transformation that has occurred in recent times is the replacement of wooden posts with stone erections. One of the reasons is that stone lasts longer than wood. Such a phenomenon was also observed in Ambala village. The stone post is circular, unlike the wooden posts. Engravings are less pronounced. The motifs observed in the wooden posts are not replicated here, however, the application of *tilak* and the adherence of values towards the post remain constant.



**Figure 12: Stone posts and ritualists, Ambala village**

In Khatrij village, ancestral worship of stone was observed. There are three stones, stones above the ground measured as - the smallest 2.6 feet in breath and one foot in height, the middle stone is 0.99 feet wide and 1.98 feet high and the biggest stone is 1.48 feet in length, 1.08 in breath and 0.3 feet in height. The sacred place is housed under two trees Gamboi (*Phyllanthus reticulatus*) and Amali (*Tamarindus indica*).

In this village for around eight generations (approximately 500 years), they have been following the worship of these stones. The biggest stone represents the founder of the village, Hira Bhai. The smallest stone is the oldest stone and the other one is regarded as the *Kul Devi* (the rain Goddess).

The use of Ashopalv (*Polyalthia Longifolia*) leaflets as a gate is a common phenomenon that signifies a good omen. Here, similar to the wooden posts, goats, chicken, rice oil, *diya*, and lemon can be seen. In Makhaniya Parbat (also known as Butter Mountain) of Jambughoda village, near Sukhi Dam, stone worship is also witnessed. Here, *Chikla Dave* for male offspring and *Chikli Devi* for female offspring are practiced.



Figure 13: Stone worship, Katrij village

### Conclusion

In the end, we can conclude by narrating an event documented by Claude Lévi Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1992), while he was doing fieldwork around 1936-1937 in Brazil, that highlights the importance of sacred geographies and sacred geometries in ensuring the durabilities of society from external and internal threats. According to Lévi Strauss, the villages of the Bororo



community of Brazil were designed in a cartwheel fashion, with each house at the same distance from the center that housed the Chief's house.

This circular geometry was very essential for their sense of security from external threats and prevented them from disintegration. The missionaries who were working there found their every attempt at the conversion of that community miserably failed, and it is when they realised they cannot have any success as long as they live in this circular structure. However, when the tribe was forced to part with their old cartwheel-like settlement to new settlements, they all converted within a very short time (Lévi Strauss 1992). The breaking of their circular settlements followed with the abandonment of their native Gods and religion shows how the geometries are important in the maintenance of the community.

Similarly, the process of removal of monoliths among the communities of Naga hills, fully documented in the archival records left by colonial anthropologists and the increasing successes of Baptist missions thereafter, brings to light the hitherto unacknowledged importance of sacred monoliths in the existence of the communities.

In the debates around human and non-human interactions and their coexistence in the new collectives, this study has attempted to narrate how societies never operate on these divisions of nature-culture and subject-object. The importance of wooden monoliths of Rathwa Bhils and for that matter, of any community premise the fact that the society itself is an outcome of the circularity of the gathering around that monolith. Removal of the post or ill following of the ritual will domino affect the entire society. Through this lens, it can be argued that these monoliths are not merely expressions or representations of a common societal identity; they are a foundation where collective identity centers around this material culture.

The argument on whether the changes among the Bhils have occurred or incurred due to opportunistic selection or cultural emulation process needs further studies. Yet, the values, the belief system and the philosophy associated with a wooden post or a stone post erection reflect an embedded cultural ethos of both the specialist and the follower. Monoliths among the Bhil echoes their past history, their relationship with nature and the ethos on which they conduct their life. The cultural values and the attitude associated reverberate in the form of an organic culture that is a derivative of their given environment which is rapidly transforming.

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### Notes

- 1 Little tradition equated with local, informal, dialects, oral tradition and its manifestations that the 'peasants' followed and practiced. See the works of Robert Redfield and Mckim Marriott for a detailed description of little and great traditions and the mechanisms of their interactions.
- 2 <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/town/802599-chhota-udaipur-gujarat.html#latestpop>. Accessed on 27/03/2022.
- 3 Fieldmap drawn using <https://my.atlistmaps.com>.

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