

GAURI—A BHIL FESTIVAL¹

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The Bhils living in the fastnesses of the Aravalli hills celebrate the festival of Gauri in a dance-drama activity lasting for forty days during the rainy season. After the maize plants have appeared on the fields, no special attention is required for the plants to grow till the harvest gets ready by October. In the intervening period, the Bhils in a few villages in Rajasthan organize their dance-drama parties almost by rotation. They enact their plays at different centres and attract both the tribal and the peasant groups to witness the show. The festival calls for pointed attention in being one of such a long duration, combining ritual and secular aspects of prayer and recreation. It stands out as an expression of tribal solidarity and managerial skill and the contribution it makes to the general life of the peasantry of the villages nearabout is rather significant.

The actors in the festival are drawn from the Bhils only. There are nine principal actors who play their roles by hereditary succession. They constitute the core of the party and remain its principal leaders. Their roles are ritual in essence. Two persons act as Shankar and Parvati. Other two provide their substitutes. One person acts as a priest and four as Bhopas (this term stands for the man who acts as a magician-cum-priest invoking the deities to appear in his body and make pronouncements). Besides these principal actors, each Bhil family of the village provides a male member to the party. The strength of the entire party thus depends on the number of the Bhil families in the village. In certain areas of the State where the Bhil population is spread only in a fragmentary way, a group of villages has been known to have organized an inter-village party of the tribe. The subsidiary actors comprise of active participants who play some of the secular roles for entertaining the audience and of accompanists who just join in the circular dance at the close of a particular item. Different persons have played these secular roles on different days, and in recent years, one change has been noticed. Some of the Bhil actors who get a fame for their performance in the neighbouring area are also hired by a few parties and paid cash amounts by way of remuneration.

The actors in the festival are males only. Women are not eligible for participating in this ritual activity which is believed to bring benefits in the form of better crops to the Bhils and to be generally conducive to their well-being. Men play the role of women in disguise and undergo

1. This paper is largely based on the field data gathered by Daulat Singh Chelawat in preparation of his Master's Examination, 1962 (University of Rajasthan).

certain taboos. They are required to abstain from wine and woman and taking of meat or green vegetables for the duration of the festival beginning on the third day of Bhadrpad (usually in August).

Permission for holding the festival is sought from the deity through the Bhopas. Every village does not undertake this exacting task of celebrating the festival every year. The deity is invoked by the devotees and she herself says whether she would like to be remembered again after three or five years. From the point of view of the participants, such a rotation is understandable in terms of the extraordinary character of the festival in regard to the nature of taboos, the duration of the festival, resources and organizational ability called for and finally the bonds of reciprocity which unite them with other villages in being mutual hosts to one another. In terms of actual relationships, it works out that in any season there may be three to seven units moving about over a region of twenty or thirty villages.

Routine activities for a day of celebrations start at about ten. In an open air centre of a host village the activities begin with the ritual of fixing the trident and worshipping it along with remembering of various related deities. Then the dramatic scenes are displayed. Their themes are already known to the local audience. One of the participants acts as a demon desirous of marrying the Goddess Amba. The deity is protected by others, a fight ensues, and the demon is shown to have died. Such scenes are interspersed with those in which actors play the roles of animals and push one another at the shoulder. Scenes depicting vigorous fights and jumps are appreciated by the audience. In yet another scene, a Banjara (a rich trader) is shown crossing a forest. The forest guard stops him and asks for the toll. After some amusing conversation in rhythmic tones, the toll is paid. Later the Banjara is waylaid by a robber. After three or four changes in the fortune of the duel, the Banjara dies. The scene is then carried over into another comic ritual. Shiva is shown as having lost his consort. The Bhils agree to tell him the whereabouts of Parvati on condition that Shiva restores the life of a man. The Lord agrees to it. It turns out that the Banjara gets his life back, Shiva gets his consort, and the proceedings for the day come to a close with all the participants and members of the party going round in the circular dance to provide the final to the events of the day.

The ritual begins in the village that decides to act it out. Members send a word to the neighbouring village and on receiving consent from there, move to it to perform their dance-drama. They visit three types of villages:—

- (a) where their own kinsmen or tribesmen are residing in very large numbers and agree to be their hosts;
- (b) where daughters from the parent village among other castes have been married;

- (c) and where the Bhils of the village have developed permanent business relations. The host village in the first case provides food for one occasion to the members of the party. In addition, a few gifts are also made. An account of these gifts is kept and return gifts made to the village in future when that would play the Gauri. Such exchanges occur among the tribesmen only. Villages that participate in these ritual exchanges are said to be linked in *udhari-hanti* relations (partners in loans).

The second type of relations bring the tribesmen into contact with members of other castes within the village and their affinal relatives outside. In a society where village-exogamy is practised, it is quite common to find the village acting as a unit in its relations with other villages. Thus a son-in-law of one household may receive respect in every household of the village. The Bhils depict this village fraternity with other castes by going to the other village where a daughter from this village has been married. This relationship is taken note of among other castes only, not that of the Bhils. One visit to the married daughter's husband's village is ritually prescribed; subsequent visits may be made on demand. These villagers are linked in what are called *kunwaya* relations. It literally means relations brought into being through a maiden.

Where the Bhil tribesmen live in areas that are heavily populated by their own tribesmen, every village does not depict a scene of marketing activities. Certain large villages are chosen as marketing centres. The businessmen in such villages try to retain their tribal customers as permanently as they can. They seek to solidify their relations by being hosts to the Bhil party for a day. These relations are called those of the *haji* and *assami*.

The Gauri unit finds it possible to visit nearly twenty centres in a season. The final ceremony is rather interesting. A clay elephant is ordered for. Images of Shankar and Parvati are seated on it. The elephant is decorated with colours. It is taken in procession from the potter's house to the village. Every Bhil village does not have the potter. As such the Gauri units visit a central village, play together for the day, and carry the elephant and the Gods in procession to their own village. They are finally placed at the temple. The main actors rush towards their homes and feel the pleasure of freedom from taboos. Liquor parties are thrown out, the people seem to compensate for their abstinence over a period of forty days. Soon the rains are over, crops ripen, and the ritual entertainment culminates in secular benefits in the form of good crops and general benefits to all.