

Gavari of Mewar: :

a visual narrative of a tribal Performance ritual

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ABSTRACT: The essay is aimed to explore a tribal theatrical performance in Mewar (Southern Rajasthan), India. The Bhil community take part in Gavari to worship the goddess Gauri and convey a social message through mythical tales, historical stories and satiric political commentary. The essay features photographs depicting the performers, musicians, religious symbols and performances highlighting the community's reverence of nature, divine feminine energy and human equality. Despite the challenges posed by urbanisation, a few troupes participate in Gavari, highlighting its cultural significance in fostering social cohesion and celebration of life in Mewar.

KEYWORDS: Bhil, Gavari, Mewar, Ritual, Performance, Tribal India

BIO: Nikhil Kaithwas is a doctoral research scholar at the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, India. His research explores the visuality, materiality and aspect of worship associated with the tribal tradition of memorialising the dead in Mewar, Rajasthan, India. His research interests include Multimodal Anthropology, Ecological Anthropology and Anthropology of Religion. He aspires to bridge the gap between academic research and the public by utilising the mediums such as photo books, photographic exhibitions and visual essays to promote a better understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural traditions.

Introduction

Gavari (also spelt as Gavri or Gawari) is a semi-musical street theatrical play performed by the Bhils of Mewar in devotion to Lord Shiva and her spouse, goddess Gauri. For the Bhils, Gavari is both a performance and a way to worship goddess Gauri, from whom the performance derives its name, 'Gavari'. The Bhil community of Mewar is one of the largest tribal communities in India, with significant populations in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The community is marked by a distinct cultural identity rooted in a mix of animistic and Hindu beliefs. They worship a range of deities, including Lord Shiva and goddess Durga, and have a deep connection with the natural world, often appeasing the spirits of the forests and venerating their ancestors (Ahuja 1965). In Rajasthan, the population of Bhils is mainly concentrated in the southern districts of Udaipur (Mewar), Dungarpur and Banswara (Vagar). Historically, the dominant castes and colonial rule have oppressed the community by limiting their forest and agricultural land access. They continue to face economic, social and political challenges (Skaria 1999). Despite the challenges, the Bhil community has continued to preserve its rich cultural heritage.

At the start of the *Bhadrapada* (August- September, end of monsoon planting season). The *Pat Bhopa* (head priest) invokes goddess *Gorjiya* at *Devra* (ancestral shrines) for a ritual called *Raati Jaga* (wakening). The *Pat Bhopa* enters a trance state in this ritual, and the goddess speaks through him. The trance and tremors signify the arrival of the divine in the *Pat Bhopa*, through whom the goddess speaks to accept or refuse their proposal for initiating Gavari. The villagers ask for her *Paati* (permission) to play Gavari. Factors such as village disputes, shrine despair, and poor monsoon can lead to the refusal. However, the villagers prepare for the ritual performance if the goddess agrees to seek peace, harmony, good agricultural produce and the well-being of their cattle. The average wait time for consent from *Gorjiya* can range from two to three years, with some groups performing Gavari even after a decade.

It is one of the ancient theatrical forms in the Mewar region. It is transmitted orally across the generations, and the only viable manner of learning is through enactment and taking part in the procession that exhibits tribal wisdom performed in a street play format. Only male members participate in the play. Women can only be present as a spectator due to their menstrual cycles. So, they stay home, tend the cattle, worship the deities at the temple and care for the elders and infants. The males dress up as females using unique costumes, jewellery, and masks. Cross-dressing, in the native's parlance, is considered a connection with the feminine divine. However, scholars in theatrical studies suggest that cross-dressing reflects more patriarchal values than the ritual (Leiter, 1999), which stems from the notion of women performing in public as a social taboo (Kathryn, 1999). They paint their faces yellow to hide the self and be in the guise of the goddess and wear jewellery, symbolising the divine feminine connection. They strive for *bhava* (collective fluid creative state) and rely primarily on improvisations rather than rehearsals. It is a unique art form that amalgamates the genres of dance, drama, song, and music and integrates all these with the art of storytelling, which is the essence of the traditional form of dissemination of knowledge and a source of entertainment for its audience.

For the participants, it is an ordeal bounded by social norms and regulations. From day one, to keep intact the auspiciousness and purity of the ceremony, the artists vowed and chose to observe a particular lifestyle for the coming forty days. They do not enter their house during the festival and abstain from non-vegetarian food, green vegetables, and liquor. They do not indulge in sexual activity, stop wearing shoes and do not sleep in bed. They are allowed to eat only once for the whole day, bathing for forty days is not permitted, and they cannot remove their anklets (*Ghungaroo*). They perform in an open space, suitably any place near the village temple. Traditionally, the troupes travel between 20- 30 villages where their sisters and daughters are married, villages of permanent businessmen and villages connected through rituals (Chauhan and Chelawat, 1978). The performance portrays stories from tribal wisdom affirming equality, communal harmony, environmental protection for sustainable development, and the divine's triumph against the demon. An average Gavari repertoire knows about 10-15 classical tales. The theatrical performance is a blend of stories which include; myths, dance, drama, tribal lore, social and cultural life of Mewar's tribal communities, historical events, satiric political commentary, and even promoting governmental schemes like organising 'open defecation-free (ODF) Olympics' to disseminate sanitation messaging and offering incentive money for constructing toilets (Deshpande et al., 2018). Today, the practice has adopted a new meaning besides the social and cultural pattern of networks Gavari is performed in the city's temples and public spaces on prior invitations. People of social importance collectively host the performers and spend cash for their food arrangements and presentation of some money to ensure the continuity of tradition and dissemination among the city's urban community.

According to the ICHCAP (2017), during the last few decades, the young members of the Bhil community have shown less interest in keeping the tradition alive. This is due to the shift from agricultural to neoliberal employment.

Traditionally, the time of the year when Gavari is performed, the agrarian economy allowed the Bhil to leave their farms planted with maize and engage in ritual performance that ensures travelling to the kin village and reaffirming social ties. However, in recent decades young male members are taking up jobs in city-based occupations. As a result, they find it hard to take leave or stop working for 40 days and participating in Gavari results in reduced income and even loss of livelihood for them (Sakoda et al., 2022). Despite the challenges posed by urbanisation and modernisation, a few troupes of the Bhil men take part in Gavari with no worthy benefit.

The photographs featured in this essay were taken at the Jain Dharamshala compound at Kesariya Ji temple, Rishabhdeo tehsil, Udaipur District, Rajasthan. The actors and artists featured in this photo essay belong to the Bhil community of Chikla village. They took leave from their city-based jobs to participate in this festival. The practice is at the cusp of change, highlighting the changes happening within the community. Therefore, this tribal art of storytelling requires people's attention from across and outside the country. The photo essay is attempted to offer a window into the rich cultural heritage that promotes social cohesion and highlights the role of the Bhil community and



Photo 1 Setting the Stage: Announcing Gavari's arrival. The *Mandali* (troupe) of Gavari performers arrive at the Jain Dharamshala, Rishabhdeo, Rajasthan. In the last few weeks, the *Mandali* has visited several villages and Mewar before arriving at Rishabhdeo. The energy and enthusiasm for the play were at their peak as the Gavari performance season was about to reach its conclusion. The musical anklets tied to their feet amidst the shouts of 'Jai Mahadeo' (Hail Lord Shiva) and 'Jai Gauri maa' (Hail Mother Gauri) announced the arrival of the Gavari players in the sub-urban and religious town of Rishabhdeo. This group was comprised of 60 male Bhil members of varied ages. They belonged to the Chikla village of Udaipur district, Rajasthan. Typically a *Madili* is comprised of *Kheliya* (performers), *Pat Bhopa* (Head Shaman), *Jamta* (musicians), and young adolescent males that are used in the filler roles. This *Mandali* is led by six *Mukhiya* (Headman). They are markedly different from the *Kheliya* by wearing a garland of Marigold flowers. The *Mukhiya* are vital in instructing the *Kheliya* and directing the play. The *Mandali* carries all the essentials for the play, including costumes, makeup, musical instruments and other accessories.



Photo 2 Situating effigy: Establishing the stage. The stage is set, and goddess *Gorjiya* sits in the centre of the performance area. It is believed that during the whole cycle of forty days, the goddess leaves her adobe and travels with the Gavari players from one village to another. Goddess is kept inside a bamboo basket wrapped in red *Chunari* (red scarf), garlanded with marigold flowers and red *Kalawa* (a thread worn on the wrists on auspicious occasions). The Colour red is associated with both sensuality and purity. It is frequently used on Hindu auspicious occasions. At the beginning of each day, the *Pujari* (priest) installs the *Trishul* (trident), *Jhanda* (flag) and *Moor Pankh* (peacock feathers) as an effigy of the goddess and performs an *Aarti* (ceremony in which light is offered up to gods) which is attendant by all participants and attendants. When evoked, her presence is believed to radiate divine cosmic energy. For some believers, her *Darshan* (view) can transcend them into *Bhaav* (a trance induced by intense religious devotion). That is why a team of Pat Bhopa and Bhopas always accompanies the Devi. They help direct and mediate the goddess's energy and avoid harming the audience.

the significance of Gavari as a form of worship and celebration of life in Mewar.



Photo 3 Warming Up. Once the goddess is evoked, the whole *Mandali* gathers for a warm-up (*Gavari ramne ki shuruwat*). It is believed to connect the goddess's energy with the players and seek her blessings. It involves circling and slow dancing around the effigy. The music of *Maadal* (tribal drum), *Thali* (bronze plates), and commands from the *Mukhiya* (headmen) turn the slow dancing into a rhythmic, synchronised, fastpaced dance. According to *Mukhiya*, It serves multiple purposes. It ensures the optimal physical, mental and emotional state of the performers. It provides a sense of ease and fluidity in their movements and voice projections. It is done for about 20-25 minutes until the performers become sweaty before finally dispersing to dress up for the various acts. Warming up is not limited to the performers alone. It also extends to the audience, preparing them for an immersive and engaging experience. It sets the ambience for the activities to follow and act as an announcement for the beginning of the play.



Photo 4 Inviting auspicious start and offering light to gods. The play starts with the *Jhanki* of Lord Ganesh, enacted by a performer. Lord Ganesh is the son of Goddess Gauri and Lord Shiva. In Hindu verbatim, the phrase. 'Shri Ganesh' signifies the start of something auspicious. In a mythological story, Goddess Gauri once asked his youngest son Ganesh to guard her chambers while she was inside. Following her order, Ganesh stops Lord Shiva from entering the section. This act infuriated lord Shiv, and he cut Ganesh's head. When Gauri learned about this act, she got enraged and warned to annihilate the whole creation. Seeing the rage of Gauri, Lord Shiv replaced Ganesh's head with that of a baby elephant. Seeing his son's love and devotion towards him and Parvati, Lord Shiv blessed Ganesh and told the devotees to worship Ganesh before starting any auspicious activity. Following this tradition, Gavari also starts with worshipping Ganesh and praying for successful completion.



Photo 5 The sacred masked guardian of Gavari. *Budiya* is a central and permanent character of Gavari. The wooden mask signifies Lord Shiva, and the hairs represent Bhasmasur (demon). The mask is kept inside *Devra* (traditional temple) for the rest of the year and is only taken out when Gavari is played. *The attire includes the wooden facemask, wooden stick wrapped in red cloth, and Ghungroo (anklets).* A crown of peacock feathers makes the performer a deity. *Budiya* is the only character in the play who gets to wear a mask. When the artists move in a circle or clockwise direction, he moves in the opposite direction. Since *Budiya* is a powerful deity, he can move in any direction. He encircles the playing area at the periphery to hold and protect the sacred energy of the inner altar. His presence in the play always feels like a fierce warrior, and no one blocks his way.



Photo 6 Shamanic leader of Gavari. *Bhopa* is a tribal shaman with semi-magical powers who organises and regulates the event. He is believed to be someone who can invoke the deities by going into a trance. A *Bhopa* can be identified in the play with his white *dhoti* (loincloth worn as a lower) and *Angarakhi* (robe) with a red circle and green semi-circle design at the back robe. The colour white symbolises purity. He encircles the inner altar to protect the energy of the goddess. During the festivities, men embody the energy of *Gorjya Mata* and thus wear her ornaments for forty days.



Photo 7 The divine twins: Rai- The Bhil goddess of Gavari. *Rai* is the Bhil version of Goddess Gauri. The character of *Budiya* has two women characters with him called *Rai*. They are believed to be different forms of Gauri as Lord Vishnu's Mohini and another Lord Shiva's wife, Parvati. The twin characters wear similar attire, ornaments, expressions and performance. *Rai* also encircles the inner altar to protect the energy of the goddess. All the female characters are played by men only. The principal characters of *Budiya*, *Bhopa* and *Rai* are hereditary characters of Gavari. They do not directly participate in the storytelling. They are integral principal players associated with the ritual.



Photo 8 *Jamtaa* and musical elements in Gavari. Gavari is played in two dramatic segments: songs and dialogues. *Jamtaa* (singer) sings the songs in the chorus, and the performers do not follow any specific pattern. Between the two plays, there is an interval where the artists go outside of the play area and change costumes. During those intervals, interludes are played with songs of cosmic elements. Two folk instruments, *Thali* (Bronze or Aluminium plates) and *Maadal* (tribal drum), are used. *Thali* is beaten with a wooden stick. The rhythm and pattern of the musicians do not follow any norm. It is mainly based on the spontaneity of the raw artistic expressions during the play.



Photo 9 Ritualistic preparations for embodied performance. At the start of every act, the dressed-up performers kneel in faith and devotion to connect with the sacred energy. The actors sit in front of the effigy with folded hands. A *Chuniri* (red scarf) is put over the head to seclude the performers from the rest of the space temporarily. They are given *prasad* (devotional offering made to god later shared among devotees) and allowed to sit and meditate continually. The performers strive for a collective trance. The music, costume, jewellery, and makeup help the performers establish contact with the divine. Once the energy of the effigy blesses the performers, they embody the characters they are performing for the time being. They energetically move back and forth before the effigy and encircle the altar. The whole theatrical performance is played encircling the altar.



Photo 10 - 11 “Kaalū Keer” is a contemporary play that tells the story of Kaalu, an older man who sells alcohol with his wife. The play features hooligans, played by children, causing trouble and fighting with two police officers. The officers chase the hooligans, apologising and urging them to stop drinking. Eventually, one officer discovers Kaalu and his wife selling alcohol. The couple manages to escape punishment by making the corrupt officers drink alcohol, worsening the situation. A comical chase and fight ensued between the drunk officer and his colleague. Eventually, the drunk officer realises his mistake and apologises for his corruption. The play addresses social issues like alcohol abuse, corruption, and illiteracy while providing entertainment and laughter. Its message urges people to reject alcohol abuse and resist the temptation of corruption. The play blends contemporary themes with traditional entertainment to remain relevant in changing times.



Photo 12 The image depicts the arrival of the Delhi emperor in the play "*Dilli Badshah*", set in Rajput territory. The play is a satiric adaptation which revolves around the historical battle of Haldighati, fought in 1576 between the Mughal army led by Man Singh I of Amber and the Mewar ruler Maharana Pratap. Initially, the Mughals were victorious, inflicting heavy casualties on the Mewari army but failing to capture Maharana Pratap. Seeking refuge with the Bhil tribespeople, Maharana Pratap was supported by Bhil archers who played a crucial role in the subsequent battle, employing guerrilla warfare tactics. With the help of the Bhils, Maharana Pratap emerged victorious, reshaping the state of Mewar. Subsequently, the Bhils are even portrayed in the Mewar state emblem and continue to hold significance in the region, which is now reserved under the fifth schedule area, granting tribal autonomy over land and forest use. The play can be seen as a reminder of Bhils contribution to forming the Mewar state.



Photo 13 The image showcases soldiers from the battalion of the Mughals. In the play, satire is a prominent element to engage the audience. It serves as a tool to critique and mock societal norms, behaviours or individuals. It employs humour and exaggeration to highlight irregularities. In the play "*Dilli Badshaah*", accessories such as funny masks, broken goggles, and distinctive makeup create a visually comical appearance. These elements add to the satiric tone of the play and contribute to its comedic effect. By employing satire and incorporating humour elements into the play, the performers aim to provide the viewers with an enjoyable and light-hearted experience.



Photo 14 - 15 The snippets are from a play based on the Ramayana, revered for its cultural and religious significance in India. The Bhils, an ancient tribal community, find representation in the epic through *Shabri Mata* (mother). This adaptation of the Ramayana by the Bhil community reflects their cultural identity as they incorporate and adapt the epic to their traditions and beliefs, interweaving it into their folklore and narratives. It showcases the creative ways different communities engage with and relate to ancient texts. The depicted images show significant moments from the Ramayana play. Photo 14 captures the meeting between Hanuman and Sita in Ashok Vatika after her abduction by Ravana. Photo 15 showcases Ravana, the antagonist, appealing to his brother Kumbhakarna. This formidable and colossal figure is awakened with great difficulty to aid Ravana in his battle against Lord Rama and his allies. These scenes from the Ramayana play highlight key events from the epic's narrative, evoking the mythology, characters, and themes that have captivated audiences for centuries.



Photo 16 In the play *“Rebariyo ka Khel”*, which portrays the life of the Rebari community, a traditional pastoral semi-nomadic group in Rajasthan and Gujarat, a snippet captures the essence of their nomadic existence and their deep connection with the natural world and diverse species. The Rebaris annually migrate in search of fresh pasture for their camels, goats, sheep and bovine. They have a profound awareness of weather patterns, nature and wildlife. The play depicts Rebari men and women moving in groups with their children, showcasing their coexistence with the natural world. A significant aspect of the play is the portrayal of a leopard, which is both feared and revered. The leopard follows the Rebaris, particularly interested in the weak and children left behind. The intense moments unfold as the leopard tries to lead the children more profoundly into the audience. Upon hearing the cries for help, the tribespeople rally together, brandishing plastic bats to protect their children. The leopard’s presence in the play adds an element of fascination and fear, especially among the children. It represents the intricate web of interdependence between humans and the natural world, where awe and caution coexist. The audience experienced the thrill of glimpsing the leopard. At the same time, some engage in playful interaction in an attempt to provoke it.



Photo 17 The snippets are from the play, “*Shiv Parvati ka Khel*”, which presents a light-hearted portrayal of the relationship between Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati. In this comedic melodrama, goddess Parvati becomes exasperated with Lord Shiva’s daily consumption of *Bhang* (Cannabis). Their disagreement escalates into an argument, leading Parvati to leave Lord Shiva and return to her father’s home. Later, Lord Shiva follows Parvati to persuade her to come back. The play captures the amusing and laughter-filled moments as the couple engages in a parody of a husband-wife fight, with witty dialogues and comedic exchanges. It reminds the audience that even deities face challenges in their relationships, similar to mortal beings. The play serves as a reminder of the need for communication and empathy within marriages and relationships, showcasing the power of dialogue and understanding in resolving conflicts and rekindling love and harmony.

Furthermore, the story highlights the acceptance of diverse perspectives and the importance of compromise in maintaining harmonious relationships. It encourages individuals to appreciate and respect the differences and quirks of their partners. The play serves as a source of entertainment while offering valuable insights into the intricacies of human connections.



Photo 18 The enthusiastic spirit of the young performers. The children try to participate in the play with great enthusiasm. They do not get the leading roles but are occasionally used in the filler roles. The desire to perform in the dance-drama is high. This picture is of a juvenile troupe member who enthusiastically wore the jewellery and applied makeup to pose for a photo. Since the practice is a part of oral tradition, the actors learn and adapt to this ritual through observations and participating in the plays by whatever means possible. The children of 7-10 years dance in the circle with the elders to get early socialisation. In this manner, they gradually develop in themselves the art of playing.



Photo 19 The Spectatorship: From tradition to contemporary relevance.

Gavari invites a vast gathering of spectators, creating a sense of solidarity and fostering a deep connection to Mewar's rich history and social fabric. This unique tradition, rooted in Bhil performances, seamlessly weaves together the past and present, ensuring its continued significance in contemporary times. According to the participants and spectators, Gavari has evolved with the interest of its audience and dedicated performers, ensuring its dynamicity and reception. The accompanying pictures capture the awe-inspiring sight of a bustling crowd inside the Jain Dharamshala compound. Every nook and cranny is filled with eager viewers, eagerly immersing themselves in the captivating experience.

Conclusion

The stories and snippets shared above shed light on the cultural richness, diversity and concerns within different communities, particularly in the context of Gavari and its significance in Mewar. Gavari, a performance ritual of Bhil, stands as a testament to the enduring cultural heritage that encompasses a range of themes, including social issues, historical events and mythological tales. Through its performances, Gavari serves as a platform for storytelling, entertainment and expressing community concerns. Play like '*Kalu Keer*', '*Dilli Badshah*', '*Rebaryo ka Khel*', '*Ramayana*' and '*Shiv Parvati ka Khel*' demonstrates the adaptability of Gavari to incorporate themes and address social issues. These plays tackle topics such as alcohol abuse, corruption, illiteracy and the role of marginalised communities in history. By infusing the performance with humour, satire and relatable characters, Gavari effectively engages and educates the audience while encouraging reflection and dialogue.

The Bhils retell the stories by incorporating their cultural context, beliefs, and environmental awareness. Integrating tribal tradition into the mainstream narrative can be seen as preserving and celebrating indigenous knowledge and practices. In light of Gavari's importance and the concerns raised

through the stories, it is evident that this traditional theatre form continues to be a powerful tool for cultural expression, social commentary, and community engagement.

However, the allure of city-based occupations and the need to secure stable incomes have drawn many young Bhil away from participating in Gavari. Nurturing and supporting these efforts, along with innovative approaches to bridge the gap between tradition and contemporary aspirations, are crucial for safeguarding the sustainability of the rich cultural tradition of Gavari. Efforts should be made to provide adequate support and recognition to artists. It is crucial to balance innovation and preservation of traditional art forms, allowing the Gavari to evolve while staying rooted in its cultural essence.

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