

Baiga Tribes: An Uneasy Journey

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BAIGAS: AN INTRODUCTION

The Baigas are semi-nomadic tribes that reside in the jungles and its fringes around the Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Chhattisgarh border in central India. They belong to the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs); the politically correct term, however, that has been used in recent times is Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)—one of the 75 remaining vulnerable tribes in India. The Baigas speak in the *dehati* (local) language, having long lost their original language. The British first came in touch with this tribe in Dindori district, where the Baigas were found living in dense jungles and inhospitable terrain, far away from 'civilized' human contact. Their journey from a reclusive tribe inside the forest to living on the fringes of villages in the last 200-odd years has been a story of great loss and apathy.

One visit to the village or any Baiga hamlet, gives a clear indication of why the community has been placed under the PVTG category. Extremely poor, untouched by education or development, the Baigas not only live a hand-to-mouth existence, but also experience a deep sense of alienation from the larger mainstream society. Part of the alienation is due to the loss of the old way of life. When first discovered by the British, and subsequently heavily reported by the anthropologist Verrier Elwin (who wrote a poignantly beautiful anthropological book called *Baiga*), the Baigas were living in the forests and had very little interaction with the world outside.

Ploughing the earth was prohibited in their tradition—being equated with ploughing the breast of one's own mother. So, in the olden days, along with hunting and gathering, *bewar* (slash and burn) was extensively practised. Elwin notes that a similar belief prevailed in one of the Native Indian tribes of Northern America, where ploughing was prohibited in the community. Also of interest is the fact that a recent study by the Anthropological Survey of India concluded that the Baigas share genetic similarities with the aborigines of Australia.

The Baigas are divided into sub-castes—the Binjhvars (Gond Baigas), the Bharotiyas, the Nahads (Langotias or Narotiyas), Rai Bhaina and Kadh Bhaina. Of the sub-castes (tribes), the ones found on the MP-Chattishgarh border areas are the Nahads (Narotiyas), the Bharotiyas and the Binjhvars. Whereas the Bharotiyas and the Binjhvars are usually small landholders, the Nahads are semi-nomadic. In Mandla and Dindori districts as well as in Birsa and Baihar blocks, the Bharotiyas have a significant presence. The Binjhvars are scattered across the Paraswada, Baihar and Birsa blocks and are quite similar to the Scheduled Caste (SC) Gonds in their way of life.

The third in the category are the Nahad Baigas (Narotiyas or Langotias). *Langotia* literally translates to 'one with a loin cloth' and has often been used in the past in a derogatory sense. As the name indicates, the Langotias are not only the poorest of the three sub-categories, particularly with respect to culture and identity, but are actually those who have not been able to align themselves, even remotely, with the so-called mainstream society. Again, it is very difficult to ascertain their numbers, owing to the confusion in the different sections amongst the Baigas and also due to the tendency of the surveys to club them as *adivasis* or in Hindu categories.

Culturally rich with unique dance forms and *colourful* clothes, the *Bharotiyas* are often showcased in front of teary-eyed, awestruck foreign tourists at the various resorts of the Kanha National Park. The Binjhvars have more or less been assimilated into the rest of the Gond tribal ways in the area and identify themselves more with the larger Gond

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community than the Baigas. As mentioned earlier, the last category, the Nahads, are semi-nomadic and live in villages inside forests or on the fringes of Gond villages, bordering the forest. More than half their life is spent inside the forest, with bamboo and associated products being their main source of livelihoods.

Neither culturally rich nor perceived as 'settled' like their other Baiga brethren, the Nahads are completely alienated from the mainstream, withdrawing from the larger society. They live in total seclusion inside the jungles and interact with the larger community only on market days or when they go to ration shops. The Bharotiyas, also called the Bharatiyas, now live in well-connected villages in Mandla and Dindori districts and in many villages of the Baihar and Birsa *tehsils* in Balaghat district.

Many government schemes have been drawn up for the Baiga community, some of them, unfortunately, have no utility to the community. For example, Sundar, a young man in Kukda village of Paraswada block, received a sewing machine as part of a government scheme. For a community that is extremely austere as far as clothes are concerned, a sewing machine as a source of additional livelihood is meaningless. The Collector of Balaghat had once remarked that if all the money spent on the Baigas had been directly transferred to the community, most families would have been *lakhpatis* (millionaires) by now.

Dwelling on the money spent per capita, however, might just be missing the larger point. The Baigas, despite their hand-to-mouth existence, earn income comparable to the Gonds from their bamboo and basket-making. Again, the idea is not to compare the earning power of two very economically poor tribes

but to understand the relative deprivation, despite their greater earning power and higher allocations through government schemes.

The Baigas are usually looked down upon by the socially more powerful Gonds in the area. Alcoholism is widespread, and polygamy, though not widespread, is prevalent. In several villages, it is not uncommon to find one man with two or three wives. Baiga legends have several references to the larger Gond society with the powerful *Bhagwan*, or God, creating the first Baiga as the elder brother and the first Gond as the younger. The tales refer to the elder brother being allowed to choose what he wants to do; he decides to let the younger one do the farming whereas he chose to live in the forest on fruits and plants. Ironically now, the Gonds control the farming lands and the forest guards control the jungles

In Balaghat district, whereas the Narotiyas (Nahads) are largely landless, the Bharotiyas and the Binjhvars are marginalized farmers with about half to one acre of landholding. In Dindori district, 50 per cent of the Baigas are landholders whereas, in Mandla district, the percentage of the landless is higher.

Today, the Nahad Baigas depend heavily on the forests for their survival. They sell bamboo from the forest or make baskets with it for sale. They are very skillful in the art of bamboo craft. Some of them collect honey. Many have eventually picked up the plough and now engage in farming. However, their semi-nomadic way of life, along with the lack of farmlands, makes farming an untenable affair. The Bharotiyas, in the interior tracks of Baihar and Birsia of Balaghat district, are dependent on wage employment to supplement their paltry income resources from crops and on the largesse of government schemes such as the public distribution system (PDS). Most of them practice broadcasting methods in agriculture

and grow minor millets such as *kodo* and *kutki*. In Mandla and Dindori districts, they are either small landowners or are landless, and face issues similar to landless families. Excessive drinking is a way of life in the Baiga household. A Baiga settlement in any village is the most inaccessible place, with no roads leading to it and no electricity.

DEMOGRAPHY

The population of the Baigas as per Census 1981 was 2,48,949. However, this could be an inaccurate demographic picture because the Baigas are sometimes clubbed in the Census as *adivasis*, or caste Hindus. The sex ratio is high when compared to the average in India, at over 990 females per 1,000 males.

The State Planning Commission Data, MP, lists the villages with presence of the Baiga population into two categories, namely, the interior/remote and the connected. The table below gives the details of the categories in the three districts of MP—Balaghat, Mandla and Dindori—as categorized by the state government.

Unlike many families in rural India, the Baigas prefer nuclear families to joint ones. Children marry early and move out of the household. Field experience shows that the normal size of even nuclear families is six to seven. A large percentage of the people do not survive until old age although it is not uncommon to find an old Baiga couple (called *dokra* and *dokri*) living on their own in some corner of the village. The number of families per village is about 25. As a community, the Baigas are quite spread out; unlike other communities that stay together to form a village majority in terms of numbers, the Baigas are a minority in most of the villages they reside in. Also, going into the details of the list of villages of the Planning Commission, one finds that there is a mis-match among the

Name of the District	Category of Village	No. of Blocks/ <i>Tehsils</i> in which the Categorized Villages Fall	Total Villages Covered	Total Families	Total Population
Balaghat	Interior	3	179	3,841	17,146
	Connected		33	901	3,580
Mandla	Interior	9	235	6,976	29,808
	Connected		48	2,057	7,799
Dindori	Interior	7	209	5,289	23,842
	Connected		284	6,056	26,412
	Total		988	25,120	1,08,587

given populations. For example, Tikaria village in Paraswada block has nine Baiga families whereas only one is listed in the Census. In Madanpur village, on the other hand, there is one Baiga family whereas the list mentions three. So, it is quite a herculean task to draw a correct demographic picture of the community.

BAIGA–SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Bada Deo, who is believed to reside on the *Sajja* tree, is the highest deity of the Baigas. Women from the community are prohibited from going anywhere near the *Sajja* tree. Mara Deo is the god of the Baigas and resides outside the houses and is prayed to secretly by the men. Not all families can worship Mara Deo. He is a God handed over as patrimony from father to son. He is widely believed and worshipped by the Baigas to bring wealth and prosperity into their households from the richer families in the village and is worshipped before the *kharif* season.

Holi and Diwali are also now uniformly celebrated. Raksha Bandhan, which was rarely celebrated, even a decade ago, is now an important festival with most families celebrating it. Pola is the harvest festival. The

day after Pola is the Narbod festival. On this day, the traditional knowledge of herbs and medicines of the forest is passed on from the older generation to the younger one. Local liquor called *mahua* is offered to *Dharti Mata* (Mother Earth) on this day. The root of a shrub called *bhaisa tard* is eaten on this day—it is believed to give strength and vitality. Legend has it that in the olden days a buffalo was tied to this root and even with all its brute strength, it was not able to uproot it.

Among both the Nahads and the Bharotiyas, *mahua* is an integral part of a marriage ceremony. The groom's family has to bring three tins (about 40 litres) of liquor to the bride's house; the guests move around in circles blessing the couple and proceed to drink liquor. The couple then travel around the village praying to all the gods and goddesses. Most marriages take place between people from nearby villages and polygamy is not uncommon. In villages where the Baigas live in close proximity with other communities, *sindoor* is widely used by the married woman.

In villages where socialization with other communities has taken place, women wear the regular sari; in interior villages, a smaller

version of the sari, called the *sola haath*, which literally translates to 16 hand lengths, is worn. Men wear anything from pants and shirts to *dhotis*, depending on their interaction with the larger community in the area. Young children generally roam about half-naked. Tattoos are common among the middle and older generation, particularly in the Bharotiyas. Usually decorated in ornament form, tattoos are a symbol of love of the parents for the girl child, for they cannot afford to give her expensive real ornaments.

Unlike in the past, the Bharotiyas and the Narotiyas today marry each other without much social taboo. However, marriage between the Binjhars or the Gonds is not an accepted social norm.

The surnames of the Baigas are similar to the Gonds in the area—such as Tekam and Uikey. Many men add Singh and the women Bai to their name.

Kukda Village Paraswada Block

There are ten development blocks in Balaghat district and the Baiga community is primarily found in the Birsa, Baihar and Paraswada blocks. Whereas in Birsa and Baihar they form quite a significant chunk of the population, in Paraswada, they are a minority community. They form about two to three per cent of the population in Paraswada, which has a population of about 97,000. In villages of the Paraswada block, the Baiga households usually live on the fringes of the village bordering the forests. Typically, the area occupied by the Baiga families is called the Baiga *tola* and about 8–10 families live in a clutter of small one-room houses.

In the forest village (*van gram*) of Kukda in Fatehpur *panchayat*, there are 35 households belonging to the Baigas, four belong to the

Gond Scheduled Tribes and three families belong to the Yadav community. The forest department has issued a *patta* for about 20 families in the village. Kukda village is at a distance of 13 km from Paraswada block and is surrounded by a thick forest. At a distance of about 5 km from Kukda lies the village of Chinni (about 6 km from the block). A drive through the undulating earthen road from Chinni takes one to Kukda.

Alternative Approach to Mobilization: Community Based Theatre

My first brush with the Baiga community was by chance. Community Based Theatre (CBT) had been initiated in Kukda around the end of November 2011. The idea was to provide a platform for the community to discuss their issues in the village and then present them creatively, not only in their village but also in other places such as the block and the district. It was an idealistic expectation that we (with the support of external trainers) would train the people of this village to raise awareness through skits and role plays. It was an attempt to reach out to the poorest of the poor and the entire team was present in several of the initial meetings and interactions in Kukda. The response of the community was one of profound reluctance initially, followed by bouts of extreme enthusiasm and eagerness, and finally mild indifference to the process. In the five months that we were actively involved in the village, there was one common factor in all the meetings that were usually held at night: most people would turn up drunk, invariably leading to a fight. During the day, a majority of the people would be in the jungle working, either bamboo-cutting or basket-making.

By the end of December, the night meetings were held fairly regularly in Kukda with a great deal of focus on village solidarity. Even people from the Gond and the Yadav families began

to come regularly. In December, about ten meetings were held. In the first three meetings, most Baigas arrived drunk, leading to much chaos and little discussion. In the next four or so meetings, the attendance was low although there were volunteers responsible for calling people to the meetings. In the next three meetings, however, most people turned up sober. Needless to say, we had to use methods ranging from coaxing, motivational talk to even mild threats of never coming to the village to persuade the community to participate in the meetings. We were a team of three (Amreesh, the external resource person from Koraput in Odisha, Yogesh, one of our community mobilizers and myself). Together with the volunteers, we would visit the villagers' homes in the evening, telling everyone that the meeting was going to start at 7 p.m. A fire would be lit in three places near the school and all the people would sit around the fire. The hardest to mobilize were the families who lived some 3 km inside the jungle, near the stream. For the last three meetings we insisted that each family was represented at the meeting and no one came drunk to the meeting, or else the meeting would not take place. Our persistence finally bore fruit and by the last week of December, we had three consecutive meetings in which the villagers were not only sober but also every family was represented.

In these three meetings, Amreesh shared with the villagers the idea behind the CBT and how they could actually get together and resolve issues of their village. After several rounds of sub-group discussions, fights, arguments and even three impromptu skits, the families reached a consensus on the issues they wanted to work on. First and foremost was the issue of housing. The Baigas live in one-room mud houses—in no way adequate—

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that leak or collapse during the monsoons. Winter brings with it the additional challenge of the cold. A log of wood is burnt the entire night and people sleep huddled around it. A thin sack on the ground forms the mattress.

Once, a representative from the bank collected Rs 500 each from about 20 families with the promise of providing houses under the Indira Awas Yojana. He left a booklet and some papers with them. The booklet was in Japanese! Which is why the villagers' foremost demand was housing for the community.

Once it was decided that the village, as a whole, would fight for their housing rights, it was time to visit the block. More than half the village walked with Amreesh from Kukda to the block. I joined them half way through this march. Two RTIs were filed: one demanding information on the amount spent by the government on Kukda in the last financial year and the other demanding the plan of the *panchayat* for Kukda for the next few years. The people came singing the song they had learnt from Amreesh over the course of several meetings:

"Chhodengay nahin, Chup baithengay nahin, Apna adhikar paanay kay liye."

The *panchayat* representatives were livid. But our interaction in Kukda continued in other ways. Some NREGS work had also started after filing the RTIs. But it was now time to raise the issue of housing at the block level. It was agreed that on 24 February 2012, we would walk to the block and file an application on the possibility of building houses in Kukda under the government schemes.

Two days before the event, Yogesh and I went to every household, telling them about the

coming event. On the morning of the 24th, I was to reach the village at 7 a.m. and we would all then march to the block with our demand for the village. It was agreed that no one would drink before we completed our work. However, when I reached the village that morning, people had already started drinking. Many families had already left for the jungle to cut bamboo. Finally, 12 of them gathered near the school premises where I was waiting. Nearly half of them were in an inebriated condition. The morning sun was beating down on us. By the time, we reached the block, 13 km away, all of them had sobered down. They sang heartily and raised slogans for about ten minutes in front of the BDO and an audience of officials and curious passersby.

After the meeting with the BDO, 25 houses were sanctioned under the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY). The unknown representative of the bank came and returned the money he took from the families. Work started in the month of August amidst a general sense of relief in the community, and they began to believe in the process. A Service Provider (SP) from the Baiga community in Kukda was selected; however, he left in a month's time.

Agriculture Intervention in Kukda

Meanwhile, the monsoons came and the agricultural intervention also started. Vegetable cultivation with 25 families and the SRI with eight families were initiated. We realized that there was a problem of cattle grazing in Chinni village. During the paddy period, the *charahas* (herdsmen) would drive their entire cattle from Chinni to the jungles surrounding Kukda. Some cattle would be left behind in the forests. These would then wreak havoc at night, when the Baiga families would mostly be sleeping or drunk. During the day as well, once the families left for the forest, the

stray cattle would break the bamboo fencing and destroy the crops. The families largely managed to save their vegetable cultivation (some even selling it) whereas the paddy was mostly lost to grazing. The success of vegetable cultivation that year was very encouraging for the community. There was scope for further agriculture intervention and scaling-up if the issue of grazing could be resolved.

In the subsequent summer, the issue of grazing was taken up with the *panchayat*, the BDO. A meeting was arranged between the IAS officer and one of the poorest ethnic groups in India. It lasted for more than three hours, with the officer patiently listening to all the issues raised by the community and assuring the community that prompt action would be taken to ensure fencing or other alternative means of protection of the crops. He also assured them that he would visit their village as soon as some ground work took place.

Our resource person came for two more visits for the CBT process. It was also his first experience working with a PVTG community in MP. Despite the three visits and stay, theatre as a platform of change could not be realized in Kukda. However, in the process, our interaction and understanding of the community increased greatly and there has been a conscious effort to include the Baiga community of the area in the various processes of the Federation. Building on our understanding, agriculture intervention was also initiated with the Baigas living in fringe areas of other villages, albeit only with moderate success.

The rains came a little early for *kharif* in 2013. There was unprecedented rainfall. Some minor officials visited the village assuring them of quick action. The IAS officer was transferred. Rain damaged some of the vegetable crops whereas the rest was eaten up by the cattle.

Nearly 90 per cent of the paddy was grazed. The community refused to touch the remaining paddy.

My own interaction with the community in Kukda has gradually lessened, partly due to the overall failure to save the paddy from grazing and also due to my engagement in other work. The families are, however, keen to continue agriculture as another basket of activity in their portfolio along with bamboo-related activities. A sense of helplessness, though, is creeping in at the inability to save their crops, particularly for a community where agriculture is not a way of life. There is also the fear that if they stop growing crops in the farmlands, the forest department would take away their lands. The success of the demand for housing has been a rallying point for the community, but a more concentrated effort is needed to bring about some meaningful change.

The Baiga Community and SHG Institutions

The SHG as an institution of savings and credit, of solidarity and, at the same time, as a platform for livelihood intervention has been moderately successful with the Bharotiyas and the Gond Baigas. The Nahads, on the other hand, have been largely left out of the process. Being landless, they depend on the forest for a considerable part of the year and, during the lean phases, migrate to cities or away from villages in search of labour. The migration usually starts from November–December and goes on till March. The people return to the village before the Holi festival. Several SHGs, with predominantly Baiga population, have become defunct in Paraswada block. In Kukda

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village, eight members of one SHG permanently migrated to other villages. Similarly, in Dendua, Arandiya, Nata, Garari and other villages of the Paraswada block in Balaghat, periodic migrations as well as widespread alcoholism, leading to extensive fights, have been

the reason for the closure of the SHGs.

The situation is similar in Baihar and Birsa blocks of Paraswada district. In Dindori district, the SHG as an institution with the Baiga community has been reasonably successful whereas in Mandla district, it has only met with partial success.

The World View of the Baigas

The Baigas are aware of their special category and that multiple schemes have been initiated for them. There is massive resentment that most of these benefits are siphoned away. The Baiga students Ashram in Paraswada has less than 15 per cent Baiga children. The forest guard is usually rude to them. The benefits of IAY are made use of by the well-off instead of the needy Baigas. Building access roads to their hamlets, housing and electricity are the three main demands of the community from the government, which have not been met. Multiple NGOs have given them momentary hope of redemption but have not delivered on their promises, leading to an enormous trust deficit of the community with the wider world.

The community is also very skeptical of people, who take photographs of them because they are a special tribe, and make money out of their photographs. They are aware that they have been given a raw deal by all other communities.

THE WAY AHEAD

There are several Baiga hamlets/*tolas* in Paraswada block and each hamlet more or less suffers from the same fate. Take the case of Dendua village. There are ten Baiga families living on the fringes of the village with about 18 small children. Only one of them goes to an *anganwadi* kendra, or school. There is no electrification or road connectivity. The 12 Baiga families in Bagholi village live nearly half a kilometre away from the main village. There is no electricity in the village and no road to reach the hamlet. Similarly, the 16-odd landless families in Tikaria migrate completely to nearby cities for many months and, in Arandiya and Jalgaon, the families live in hutments with no electricity or connectivity. In Baihar and Birs blocks of Balaghat also, many Baiga villages neither have electricity nor roads connecting them. In Kandai and Navhi panchayats in Baihar, which has a predominant Baiga population, power connectivity is negligible and the roads are dilapidated.

There are some positive stories of assimilation, wherein the authorities have taken active steps in the area. In the Baiga hamlet of Tattighat village in Paraswada, there are roads and electricity, and the teacher visits the home of the child if he or she skips school even for a single day. All the children from the 14-odd families in this hamlet go to school. They have also received patta for their land. Their portfolio of livelihood includes basket-making, agriculture and honey collection from the forest. Also, Baihar Nari Utthan is an organization focused on working with the Baigas in the three blocks of Baihar, Birs and Paraswada. They have managed to get

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Community Forest Rights (CFR) for seven villages and Individual Forest Rights (IFR) for 85-odd families in six villages.

Overall, the state in which the Baigas live today is abysmal. There are no clear-cut solutions to rehabilitate one of the most economically and socially poor ethnic groups in the world; particularly in the case of the Paraswada block, where most belong to the semi-nomadic

landless Narotiyas category and are an extremely thin minority, living on the fringes of villages.

A concentrated case-by-case, village-wise effort could be one of the ways out. For example, road connectivity and electrification is nil in all the hamlets of the Baigas. This needs to be immediately changed. It is assumed that the members of the Baiga community are drunk most of the time, are used to living in abject conditions and no amount of social inclusion will do them good. It is very hard to change social attitudes and behaviour but what was done in the Baiga hamlet of Tattighat, can also be replicated across the area. Some years back, a moderately successful land distribution programme was initiated with the Baigas. However, the land given to them was far away from the village and many were not even aware which land was allotted to them. Land rights for the community would be a step in the right direction.

Finally, there is the complex issue of social alienation. Whereas the number of Baigas is steadily on the rise, the very lifeline of the community, that is, their culture, dignity and social survival is endangered with widespread alcohol abuse which they indulge in to cope

with the deep chasm of the dichotomy of their world and the mainstream. The freestyle living of the Baigas where alcoholism, migration and polygamy are a way of life are, in some ways, a direct confrontation of our perceived social values of a regulated and regimented

way of life. The struggle will be a long-drawn one, and the education of the children of the community, sustainable livelihoods for the families and the availability of basic facilities such as roads and electricity will go a long way to address the alienation of the community.