

UNHEARD VOICES: ESSENCE OF BAIGAS WOMEN, MYTHS, FOLKLORES AND SACRED GROVES

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ABSTRACT

Baigas, Bhumijas, Bhumiya, the aborigines of the central India, are unique in their fundamental philosophy of nature and earth worship. They regard themselves as 'Bhumiputras' or 'son of mother earth,' and this notion is a core constituent of Baigas' spiritual ideology. Their affinity to nature and the perception of female entity in nature immediately brings them in the purview of ecological feminism, and calls into examination (a) the connections between women and nature in Baiga society, (b) the role of women in Baiga society and (c) the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (or male-centered) society. Further, the sacred groves of Baigas carry dual significance. First, they represent one of the original indigenous religious belief systems of tribal India. Second, they present the site for the Baiga's commitment to environmentalism. Baigas, regarded as the myth keepers of the tribal world, take the metaphysical conceptions of the origin of universe and their role in it rather seriously. Baigas physical spaces and population are already declared endangered (PVTG group) due to encroaching urbanity. Now their worldview, cult and doctrines are getting threatened because of their increasing interaction with modernization, education and technology. On the basis of these premise, the proposed paper is an examination of the Baiga belief system at the conceptual level, and the role of women, within and outside of this system, at the practical level. The environment chosen for the study are the blocks and villages of Baiga abundant Dindori Mandala and Balaghat districts of Madhya Pradesh. This research is an effort that also aims to understand and find ways to secure this ancient belief system.

KEYWORDS: PVTG, Baiga-Chak, The Supreme Soul, Sacred Groves, Adivasi

Article History

Received: 17 Jan 2024 | Revised: 19 Jan 2024 | Accepted: 22 Jan 2024

INTRODUCTION

Baigas call themselves Maati-putra, the Earth Children. They are a semi-nomadic animistic tribe inhabiting the dense, inhospitable jungles of Madhya Pradesh (MP) some of who are at present also settled around the periphery in the heart of India and fighting for individuality and preservation of their way of life with forces within and without the community. They belong to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)—one of the 75 remaining vulnerable tribes in India. The Baigas speak in the indigenous Baigani language (a language of Indo-Aryan Stock belonging to the Indo-European Phylum) with a heavy influence of Hindi dialect, having long lost all trace of their native Austroasiatic language and have assimilated the speech of their neighbours.

The British first came in touch with this tribe in Dindori district, where the Baigas had moulded a hostile and inhabitable environ into a sustainable existence, far away from the so called 'civilized' human contact. The Baigas with all their ancient wisdom represent the world of Adivasis, all victimized and battling for a common survival. Their perseverance and dignified battle for their existence and way of life elevates this struggle to the height of tragedy.

Roughly about three and a half lakh Baigas occupy the Maikal range of the eastern Satpura hills. They subsist in three distinct geographical spreads. The largest concentration of Baigas live in Mandla, Dindori, Balaghat and Seoni districts which is about 250 kilometers from Jabalpur city, the focal point of our study, the geographical area called Baiga-Chak. Bilaspur, Kabirdham and Surguja districts of Chhattisgarh have the second largest majority of Baigas. And a smattering of Baigas reside in Sidhi, Rewa, Satna, Shahdol, Mirzapur and Sonebhadra districts of Baghelkhand region, in both MP and Uttar Pradesh (UP).

We at the onset of the present study did the faux pas of approaching Baigas with the same highhandedness of the mainstream, where we set out to research the role of women in the sacred groves of the Baigas. We focused on gender parity, trying to ensure the access of women and men to same opportunities, rights, material conditions while respecting their specificities. But what we learnt from them is a whole new world, as alien and as foreign to us as if we have stumbled upon a new civilization. We found out that there is no gender difference in the minds and actions of these forest dwellers as we perceive in the mainstream patriarchal world.

The Baigas are frequently identified as the Earth's first occupants in the regional mythology. The origins of the Baiga people have only been passed down orally through generations, with no known written records of their past existence. The account of the birth or creation of the Baigas is among the most fascinating of these myths. The most intriguing and well-known of the various creation myths told by the Baigas is the one mentioned below.

According to one of the myths believed by the Baigas, Badadev (The Supreme Soul) first created a man and a woman from the dirt, which had settled on his body during the twelve years of dhyaan (meditation). They were the Nanga Baiga and Nanga Baigin, Badadev cut his little finger, smeared blood on the two figures and breathed life into them. They went to live in the middle world where there was only water and barren earth crust. In order to bring rich life to the middle world, four animal companions were ordered to go to the demiworld and bring back Dharti-Mata. After numerous difficulties they set up their way to the under- world, and met Dharti-Mata, who agreed to be swallowed by the companions if they would worship her till the end of eternity. But a serpent god of the demiworld discovered them as they stole away, and snatched back Dharti-Mata. The four animal companions were ordered to return to the middle world. But by chance, a small speck of Dharti- Mata remained lodged in the teeth of one of the companions, and this was taken and mixed with the drops of nectar of the flower of mahua tree. This mixture turned into the soil that expanded, forming the earth crust, fertile and lush covering the whole expanse of the planet. But the earth was not stable and kept shaking(probable earthquakes) because of the Dharti-Mata being still trapped inside the underworld. To secure Dharti-Mata, Nanga Baiga was called, but as he was naked he was too shy to come out of the water, according to the tribal legend, Nanga Baiga was given a piece of cloth that measured 9 Hands long, but it, he kept only the cloth measuring about one and half hands long to barely cover his loins and returned the remaining cloth. The propensity of the Baigas to wear minimal clothing can be traced to this ancient legend. The remaining cloth was worn by the Nanga Baigin as sort of a dress *Lugra* or *Chitra* which was basically the cloth that is tied around the waist and then carried across the breasts over the right shoulder and then tucked at the back.

God also created the Agariyas who created 4 large nails which were used by Nanga Baiga & Nanga Baiga to firmly nail the four corners of the earth, binding in the custodianship and deification of Dharti-Mata.

Dharti-Mata liked Nanga Baiga and Nanga Baigin and agreed to look after him and remain in the middle world, if they would worship and offer sacrifices to her. Dharti Mata's association with the Baigas is very strong, she is all powerful, any festival or celebration of home or the community does not go without oblation to the devi first. Food prepared for any festival, sacrificial animal, hooch made from mahua and all libations are first offered to Dhartimata (Mother Earth).

Nanga Baiga and Nanga Baigin had two sons, the elder son's children were the Baigas; the younger son was the ancestor of all others.

The name "Baiga" means "sorcerer, magicians and medicine man" believed to be the holiest and most powerful holy men among all the clans living in the vicinity. The other tribes also recognize the Baiga as the original inhabitants and respect their decisions in boundary disputes.

They are considered the most ancient and the wisest of all, the tribes around them seek their council in variety of issues like the health of their crops, harvest related problems, infertility in men and women, recovery of stolen goods and protection from predators like mountain bears and tigers.

Erstwhile nomadic hunter-gatherers, who practised shifting agriculture (Bewar), The Baigas assert that they are averse to ploughing because it entails slashing the Earth Mother's breasts with the iron plough for the same reason, they also reject using burned bricks to construct their homes since they don't like to hurt the Dharti-mata by kiln-firing clay.

Bewar, a type of shifting farming that doesn't need plow animals and employs fire to clear forest area. After burning the vegetation, crops are planted in the ash-fertilized soil. The tribe leaves the initial tract to heal after two or three planting seasons before moving on to another area. This is also based on the tribe's belief that Mother Earth would eventually get weaker if asked to provide food from the same plot of land repeatedly. They are able to extract 8 months of food from the land by Bewar and rest supplement it with foraging forest products.

Baigas are also known to be extremely knowledgeable about the medicinal and healing properties of the various species of flora and fauna found in the forests of central India. It is a pure and innocent race and while growing up a Baiga child through a demanding 12-year period needs to study eight different types of Baiga skills. A Baiga youngster (including boys and girls) was required to learn how to track his prey, go on spear and arrow hunts, fish, and work with various metals, particularly learn how to become a blacksmith, bamboo weaver, and carpenter. Using niwar and munj ropes, a Baiga child also learns to construct wooden cots. The Baiga children are also required to get familiar with at least 50 herbs that grow nearby and their medical use. They have incredible understanding of both common illnesses and unusual medicines that can be used as contraceptives. Also, a Baiga kid is taught how to perform several pujas (knowledge of conducting about 15 ways of puja-worships) and the revered importance of Sacred Groves. In order to endure any drought, flood, or other disaster, a Baiga is trained by his elders to recognise at least 25 edible varieties of unusual roots, flowers, and fruits that exist in the region's woodlands. All Baiga kids would eventually learn how to dance in a group and how to incorporate different rhythms and beats into their dances which is part of their spiritual journey.

Sacred Groves too have a unique spiritual importance to Baigas. A form of sacred natural place where portions of a forest are safeguarded and venerated because of their link with a deity, spirits, or ancestors is a sacred forest. Sacred Groves are traditional community-conserved forest sections that have great cultural or spiritual importance for the people

who live there. Festivals, ceremonies, rituals, and offerings are carried out inside the sacred woodlands. Sacred forests can range in size from a small group of trees to thousands of hectares. This is protected by the community and although sacred forests have been hailed as a community conservation model, women remain on the side-lines of sacred forest management. For the Sacred Groves of Baigas we investigate Baiga women's attitudes regarding their sacred forests, the taboos surrounding sacred forests, and the changes they hope to see in the future in order to fill this gap in the literature.

The Baigas have lived in communion with the elements of nature, and their everyday lives and livelihoods continue to be interwoven with their forest habitat. Baigas set up their homes close to the Sacred Groves. A legacy of prehistoric traditions of nature conservation, sacred groves are patches of forest that the Adivasis protect preserve and venerate as sacrosanct. The Baigas believe that the source of all diseases is due to the wrath of their Gods & Goddesses, Associations of different diseases is with a different god or goddess, and each of them is associated with a tree in the Sacred Grove.

They intensely believe that in the cities, God lives in temples,

In Baigaland God is everywhere (Rookh humare dost hain) Trees are our friends, they are Gods. (Bade Bade Pakhna) Rocks have Gods in them. Water is worshipped as Divine

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Deeply held spiritual beliefs ensure that not a tree is felled nor a creature harmed within its boundaries, for example an attack by a snake, scorpion or wild animal is because Raatmai devi is aggrieved, she is the protector of wild animals. Dhartimata is all powerful, any festival or celebration of home or the community does not go without oblation to the devi first. Food prepared for any festival, sacrificial animal, hooch made from mahua and all libations are first offered to Dhartimata (Mother Earth).

Agnidevta is also the next in power. His wrath will cause fire at homes and the revered forests, the sacred groves an abode of all these gods are also under the protection of the Agnidevta. To keep him in good spirits, Agnidevta is offered sacrificial animal and food prepared for the celebration after Dhartimata and before consumed by the people. The Baigas pray to Agnidevta to protect their crops and jungle from fire. People believe that Veharvasi, Annmata and Markidevi protects the Baigas from diseases and the fury of these gods cause physical and monetary loss. Buddhadev causes the whole body to ache and the patient would not be able to leave the bed while also profusely sweating. Maharani devi's indignation causes dizziness and the person can slip into deep sleep and disorientation. Mahara devi and Deshaawar devi cause bouts of vomiting and diarrhoea and only a Baiga priest can tell which goddess is the cause of it. A raging anger of Thakur dev is the cause of an epidemic--haija, where the whole community is obliterated. Baigas have seen the entire villages collapsing from it unable to recover.

Thakur dev resides in the Sacred Groves of Sarai called Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) a tree which has medicinal and astringent properties and is majorly used to prevent diarrhoea and dysentery. The leaves and bark of Sarai are used to treat leprosy, wounds, ulcers, cough, gonorrhoea, headache and vaginal discharges. The plant resin has astringent carminative and stomachic properties. Thakur dev also resides in the Mahua tree—*Madhuka* (*Madhuca Longifolia*) considered to be a

cooling agent, galactagogue and an astringent are beneficial for heart, skin and eye diseases. Baigas say that Heaven is where there is a Mahua tree- the tree of life. A heady wine is extracted from the flowers of Mahua along with various medicinal uses of the whole plant.

Along with Thakurdev, village devi Khermai the protector of all Baigas also resides in the Mahua tree, she protects from all natural disasters. Her pooja is only done once in three years at the Sacred grove where Thakurdev resides in the Sarai or Mahua grove. Her pooja sthal is the Madhai also called the Thakurdev's Madhai. Baigas believe that Khermai devi keeps them disease free and she is the most forgiving of their shortcomings.

Baagheshwardev resides in the deepest jungles and his representation is mostly missing in the Sacred Groves. Keeping him happy ensures that no Tiger ever attacks and devours a Baiga and is under subjugation. The Baags(Tigers) are Baigas' biggest threat in the jungles where their livelihood and sustenance exists. During the Harvest of Kutki (Picrorhiza Kurroa) a medicinal plant curing persistent fever skin disease and diabetic symptoms growing in the deepest parts of the forests in MP is where Baagheshwardev pooja sthal is. The replantation of Kutki usually happens in the month of August and September every three years which is also the lifecycle of Kutki and it corresponds to the pooja archana of Baagheshwardev.

Bada Deo, the spirit of the forest, believed to dwell in the Saaj tree (*Terminalia tomentosa*) uniquely stores water in its woody trunk, 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.

Vanjaarinmai is a Vandevi(goddess of the jungles) whose temple is established or the Bhu pratishtha happens at the entrance and exist of the Ghat. She is represented as a pile of Rocks which subsequently keeps increasing because the Baiga will offer a precious totem or a revered symbol in the form of a rock to this pile receiving Abhyadaan (protection from fear) from Vanjaarinmai.

In Baiga societies women make a substantial contribution to the subsistence of the group When women actively participate in foraging for food in Baiga communities, they are instrumental in the group's ability to survive. The position of women and men in such a society is as equal as one could possibly imagine it to be anyplace in the world. There aren't many blatantly male-only political positions in these societies. One discovers that those who exercise authority over others are subject to some sort of check which is completely lacking in this world. The way of living in these communities frequently makes it much simpler to exercise a significant amount of autonomy and freedom as well as to participate in group decisions.

Baiga women enjoy a better status and freedom than their mainstream counterparts, especially in the choice of a husband, premarital sex licence, seeking of divorce and so forth. A husband and wife in a Baiga household are essentially partners with equal rights in all respects, with the exception of their property (which is not jointly owned, because women are free to marry after divorce or widowhood and the forest lands are part of the community). Nominally, everything belongs to men, with the exception of the personal items a wife has inherited from her parents. Baiga women are highly

respected in their society. They only marry for practical reasons, and girls are never forced into marriage and hence do not usually have children at a very young age. Their esoteric knowledge of herbs roots and plants especially for contraceptive purposes help them regulate their decision of preventing conception in case the time is not right. But by and large the tribal woman has a wide freedom, which she seldom abuses. She can go to a bazar, even by herself. She can visit her friends. She can dance and sing, especially before marriage, as she pleases. With any men she can joke around and laugh without being judged or looked down upon. After marriage, her independence naturally gets slightly curtailed due to the additional responsibility of home children and management, yet even then, she is still free to be herself.

Elwin's explanation of the shamanistic function of the Baiga women was captivating. It is common among the tribes of central India that she is the custodian of black magic and possesses an unmatched understanding of plants & herbs and an impressive repository of tribal lore

Elwin describes a woman shaman.

"The Shamanim is indeed an impressive and honourable figure. She lives a dedicated life on the boundary between this life and the next. A young girl like Sondan of Rungding had the observed look of the idealist and dreamer; she knew herself to be someone apart; she must not enter too much into the ordinary business of life or be stained by vulgar context; quite, dignified, efficient, she made one think of a world of values foreign to this. The mysterious other-world 'below' was already more real to her almost maiden imagination than the harsh reality of earth. And even bustling business-like efficient little Amiya, who was a thoroughly 'this world' type, did by her obstinate and life long refusal to seek carnal pleasure in the world of temptation that developed her, establish the priority of spiritual things. The dedication, the sacrifice, the tutelary came first. "To the sick and lonely, the shanim is the nurse and friend. the guide, the analyst. To the stranger's eye she may be just one more dirty old village women; but to the Saora whose life is broken by tragedy she may well be an angel of strength and consolation."

The Women of Baiga tribe are the powerhouse and in lead where they want to be. Women in Pondi village (within the BaigaChak), thirty kilometres from Dindori district, have scripted an amazing story about preserving forests and becoming self-sufficient in last 16 years. The programme, spearheaded by 40-year-old Ujjiyaro Bai Kevatiya, has helped 110 Baiga tribe families preserve and rehabilitate 1,500 hectares of forests. The women of each family followed Ujjiyaro to victory. The crusaders established three severe restrictions, including refraining from cutting down living trees, forbidding strangers from doing so, and actively putting out forest fires. The efforts eventually began to bear fruit, as the forest cover began to regenerate. Despite immense resistance from the men folk who did not want to get involved in any controversy the women got together with an NGO National Institute of Women, Child and Youth Development Dindori district (NIWCYD) to make this huge impact.

The restoration of the year-round twin waterfalls has made the entire village water self-sufficient, according to NIWCYD district coordinator Rahangdale, thanks to pipelines supported by WaterAid.

Taking inspiration from the Hindu festival Raksha Bandhan women put Rakhis on the trees, making them into their brothers, and in order to make sure that protecting trees became the top priority for Pondi village residents, other religious rites, such as Parikrama of the forest, were also instituted.

The creation of a Biodiversity Record for the 1,500-hectare woodland region was a pioneering exercise. It included every specific aspect of the biodiversity, including information on both plant and animal species. Two more Pondi village residents, Mangu Baiga and Sonkali Bai, added, "Today, if you question any kid in the village about Biodiversity in our jungle, the kid will quickly reply not only about every plant species, but also about birds and other animal species."

The save jungles movement, which began in Pondi village in 2006, has also contributed to the preservation and renewal of the entire biodiversity, including 26 rare and priceless herbal species, 43 leafy vegetable varieties, 13 types of mushrooms, 18 varieties of tuber plants, 24 fruit varieties, and 29 non-timber forest products.

The world is changing and so is the Adivasi society. Unfortunately, due to the demands of development and the shifting attitudes and beliefs of the people that protected them, the majority of sacred groves in India are quickly disappearing. They don't believe in building structures or fencing over portions of land because they believe that their deity lives outside in the open.

In addition to many members of their communities adopting different religious identities and starting to follow gurus and babajis, temples have been built around the sacred groves where many of the deities had lived throughout the years. They were made to believe that their traditional values, which placed a strong emphasis on preserving the environment, were superstitions. The nexus between local contractors and politicians led to extensive tree cutting, and soon these trees started to vanish and were replaced by commercial structures. Various reasons are now the cause of worries about the state of Sacred groves. Development, commercial forestry, Sanskritization (the process of replacing indigenous gods with mainstream Hindu gods, which leads to the construction of temples inside sacred forests), shifts in belief systems, cultural change, pilgrimage, tourism, removal of biomass, invasive species, encroachment, modernization, market forces, fragmentation, and perforation are just a few of the threats they face.

CONCLUSIONS

Baigas connection to Dharti Maa is a faith of the primordial human still in tune with nature and nature spirits. They have secured the revered position of the priests among tribes. Their pantheon consists of several major and minor deities – Dharti Maa, Bada deo, Mara deo, Bhimsen, Nanga Baiga, Nangi Baigan among many others. For long, religion has been a way of life for Baigas. It has offered them a belief, behavior and belonging. Their societal roots and religious doctrines have been intertwined and defined their shared practices. Baiga women live in consonance with the forces of nature and derive everything from it for their sustenance and livelihood. Their reverence of the Sacred Groves teaches them to harness the fertile energies of the forest with a staunch belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits residing in them, which probably has been central in the biodiversity conservation since the existence of man. The Baiga Women decorated with tattoos, influenced by the surrounding environment and natural resources where they live are deeply anchored in their spiritual values, believing that heavily tattooed women get a special space among the pantheon of Gods. Baiga women are instrumental in preservation and cherishing of their religion, rituals and customs. They are placed not only in the Baiga pantheon, but are also its significant perpetuators. In case of Baigas, forest conservation is equivalent to religion conservation. But now the circumstances are changing and the impact of modernization is getting visible. There is increase in education. Forest habitat of Baigas is shrinking because adjacent forest land is being transferred to tiger reserves. ICT and technology induced changes are creeping in, and most importantly, educated Baiga youth are getting lured by the charm of urban life and available viable economic opportunities. All these factors are causing a shift in conventional Baiga lifestyle and belief system. In these changing situations, Baiga women are also undergoing transformation. They are

coming out to claim their right to education, right to land ownership and right to employment. In their own marginal efforts, they are trying to come out of their subordinate subsistence level and enforcing their new identity. So what do all these transformations mean for Baigas myth system and spiritual consciousness, how much of it will remain intact and how much will get lost in transition remains to be seen.

At a time when women from the modern dominant socio-religious groups are challenging prohibition and restrictions on entry into temples and participation in religious ceremonies, Baiga women's spirituality forms a complex web of linkage to the cosmos, inextricably linking them to the forest ecology and bio-diversity through their traditional practices. This research paper provides a glimpse into Baiga's animistic system of religion that offers not only a space, but an authoritative role for women to lead their communities into spiritual well-being and thereby contributing to survival and empowerment of the whole tribe. Return to nature implies restoration of respect towards women and equilibrium in society.

The study highlights the commitment and contribution of Baiga women towards their religion and nature. World will recognize the distinct religion of Baigas and that it is not reconciliatory with Hinduism or any other major religious system of India. The pressure of cultural assimilation that Baigas are undergoing is to be recognized and worked upon. The significant role played by the Baiga women in maintaining their uniqueness while upholding their ancient wisdom is also to be validated.

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