# Bhil Children and their Learning of History at School

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ABSTRACT

The lives of most children from the Bhil community (the largest Adivasi or indigenous group in India) are characterised by extreme poverty, poor health conditions, and frequent migration. Amidst the socio-economic reality of their lives, what Bhil children learn about their past acquires significance. History learning constitutes a fundamental aspect of their identity formation, both within the Adivasi group and the nation-state. This paper presents an ethnographic account examining the extent to which learning history at school has enabled Bhil children in two blocks of Khargone district in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh to relate with their past and develop an understanding of history. It presents a thematic analysis of children's responses to questions related to the concept of history, the history of their region, and a popular symbol from India's history and draws out their epistemological, sociological, and pedagogical implications.

**Keywords**: *Indigenous, education, history, pedagogy, tribe, knowledge.*

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## 1. Introduction

Bhils, the largest Scheduled Tribe (hereafter, ST)[1] group in India in terms of population, are confronted with acute poverty, malnutrition, and forced migration (Nilsen 2018; GOI 2014). Their economic peril has been brought about by several factors, including the framework of development adopted by the state (Xaxa 2011). As per the last census conducted by the Government of India in 2011 (GOI 2013), Bhils have recorded extremely low literacy rates. The low literacy rates amongst Bhils need to be understood in the light of broader issues pertaining to the education of ST children. In the National Focus Group discussions on problems of ST children (NCERT 2007: 11-26)[2], several concerns were raised related to their education, including lack of access to schools, low attendance levels, high drop-out rates, and gender disparities. Social factors such as poverty, ill health, hunger, displacement and forced migration, and unequal provision of schooling were considered important factors that continue to keep ST children out of school. Additionally, it was acknowledged that the school curriculum in India echoes the knowledge of dominant groups and marginalises the experiences, values and knowledge of tribal children.

[1]The term 'Scheduled Tribe' is an administrative term adopted in the Constitution of India to classify and identify groups who would benefit from the protective measures, special provisions and reservations in public sector higher education institutions and employment opportunities guaranteed to them by the state.

[2] National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was set up as an autonomous organisation by the Government of India in 1961 to undertake and promote education related research, train teachers, and develop curricular materials, including the curriculum framework, textbooks and digital resources. While drafting the National Curriculum Framework 2005, a National Focus Group was constituted to examine the contemporary state of schooling of children from Scheduled Tribe groups. They produced a position paper raising concerns over the existing school curriculum and its neglect of the epistemologies of children belonging to ST communities.

In the context of socio-economic deprivation and marginalisation, inadequate and unequal provision of schooling, and lack of meaningful learning experiences, the question of Bhil children's learning of history acquires significance. An understanding of history could enable children from marginalised groups to develop a sense of identity (both individual and group) and help them make sense of the social, economic and political forces that are interlaced with their lives. This paper examines the ideas of Bhil children on three aspects related to history: (i) what history is, (ii) history of their village/region, and (iii) a popular symbol from India's history.

## 2. The Bhil Adivasis[3], Children and Education

Bhil Adivasis are one of the largest Adivasi groups in India with a population of roughly 17 million (GOI 2013). Bhils and their subgroups are spread across a vast region of western India, primarily the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharasthra (Ibid.). The various Bhil sub-groups have customs, practices, and languages that are different from one another.

Bhils have been integral to the Indian historical tradition. According to Babu (2013), the word Bhil is derived from a Dravidian word, meaning bow, and Bhils are considered the 'bow-men of Central India' (260). Bow has been considered the traditional weapon of Bhils (Varma 1978). Bhils have found a place in the narratives of the ancient epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata[4], making them significant in the ancient literary traditions in the subcontinent. Additionally, there are several myths that attempt to explain the origin of the Bhil community.[5]

Bhils have a history of integration, participation, and resistance in the medieval and colonial politics of the Indian subcontinent. Skaria (1999) challenged the colonial narrative of Bhil history. He contested the notion that Bhils were marginalised in pre-colonial India. On the contrary, he described Bhil chiefdoms as sovereign with political dominance over the hilly regions of Central and Western India. Bhil chiefs could claim dues from the villages situated in the plains and these claims were considered legitimate by the Maratha and Rajput rulers (Skaria 1999). Rajputs considered Bhils as the original inhabitants of the land as the accession of Rajputs to the throne was accompanied by marking Bhil's blood on their brows (Varma 1978). The arrival of colonial state led to a transformation of this dynamic. Bhils were given brutal punishment on the suspicion of theft and their access to forest resources was severely restricted. Under the pacification schemes, Bhils were left with no option but to pursue settled agriculture and, consequently, got caught up in the oppressive nexus of tax-collection and debt (Mosse 2005). The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries witnessed several instances of Bhil resistance and rebellions. However, as argued by Nilsen (2015, 586), Bhils attempted to create an advantageous position in the new modalities of power brought about by the colonial state through 'collective action'. The arrival of colonial rulers

[3] In this paper, the term Adivasi (literally meaning original dwellers) is used to refer to Bhils instead of 'Scheduled Tribes' or tribes used for administrative purposes. The rise of Adivasi studies as a field of enquiry is a part of an effort to decolonise research on groups that have a long history of displacement, dispossession and resistance. Although establishing indigeneity and original inhabitation is fraught with challenges, claiming an Adivasi identity is an assertion against dispossession from their own resources including 'land, forest, water and minerals' and subjection to misery and exploitation (see Xaxa 2008: 38). The discourse foregrounds their voices and emphasises on the multiplicity of their experiences (see Damodaran and Sengupta 2022).

[4] The character of Eklavya in Mahabharata and Shabri in Ramayana are believed to belong to the Bhil group. See Varma (1978: 4-6).

[5] See Varma (1978: 1-2).

brought a 'new form of state-making that changed the terms of Bhil integration into the regional political economy of western India' (Ibid.: 577).

For the ease of administration, the British began classifying groups as 'tribes'. The British colonisers grouped various diverse groups under the category of tribe with no clear or uniform criteria for classification. After India's independence, the post-colonial state did not abandon the colonial approach towards Adivasis. It continued the system of categorisation and enumeration adopted by the British administration to identify groups who were eligible to claim the protective measures and reservations guaranteed by the Indian constitution. However, despite the rights guaranteed to the STs, the groups continue to suffer from land alienation, dispossession, and forced migration.

In the late twentieth century, Bhils residing in the Narmada valley were the largest group to be displaced due to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Several activists participated in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Campaign) from 1985 onwards. Whitehead (2007) contended that 193 villages of Madhya Pradesh were submerged by the construction of the dam and more dams are being planned further upstream. From being lords of the hills and controllers of trade with Rajput kingdoms to being dispossessed and displaced due to large-scale development projects, Bhil groups are a vulnerable community today.

Today, most Bhil Adivasis face extreme poverty and deprivation. Due to the unreliability of cultivation as a sustaining source of income, Bhils are forced to migrate and work as wage labourers (Mosse 2005). The precariousness of life engulfs children as well. For several Bhil children, childhood is a web of poverty, poor health, displacement, and frequent forced migration (Thakur 2024, Pradhan and Sharma 2011, Whitehead 2007). Furthermore, Bhil children in Madhya Pradesh suffer from poor literacy levels (GOI 2013). In August 2013, a High-Level Committee was constituted by the Prime Minister's Office to examine the socio-economic, educational and health status of tribal communities and recommend appropriate measures. The Committee, chaired by Virginius Xaxa, highlighted the reluctance in implementation of the legislations for tribals and emphasised upon the need for a clear mechanism and plan for implementation of tribal rights (GOI, 2014). With reference to the education of tribal children, the committee identified several areas that need crucial attention. These included inadequate facilities, low attendance, teacher absenteeism, quality of education, untrained teachers, discrimination in school, and insignificant representation of tribal culture, history, and dynamics in the school curriculum.

Given the challenges associated with the education of Adivasi children, the question of learning history acquires significance. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (hereafter, NCF-2005)[6] highlighted the importance of learning history for a child's conceptualisation of their past (NCERT 2005). Alongside, it raised the pedagogical need of connecting local oral histories with the study of regional and national histories (Ibid.: 32). This paper adopts an ethnographic perspective to explore what Bhil children in a small region of south-western Madhya Pradesh understand by history, their familiarity with the history of their group and region, and their knowledge about a popular symbol from the Mughal empire. An investigation into the learning of history by Bhil children

[6] India's national policy on education makes it mandatory to develop a national curriculum framework (NCF) that articulates the aims of education and provides the guiding principles for curriculum development. India's apex educational research and curriculum development institution (NCERT) prepares an NCF to support development of a national system of education according to the vision set in the policy. The NCF-2005 remains the framework in use while the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE 2023) was in the process of being implemented through new textbooks, changes in the syllabus and other recommendations during fieldwork.

could provide important insights for their identity formation and their association with the community as well as the nation-state.

## 3. Methodology

The ethnographic[7] study was conducted in Madhya Pradesh, the Indian state with the maximum population of Bhil Adivasis (roughly 6 million). The study was focused in the Khargone district lying in the south-western part of Madhya Pradesh. Khargone has River Narmada flowing to the north and Satpura Ranges to its south. Major portions of land falling under the tribal region in Khargone are hilly, rough and 'not suitable for agriculture' (Varma 1978: 20). The district has a large ST population (mostly comprising of Bhils and its sub-groups) and extremely low literacy rate (45%), particularly in rural areas (GOI 2013).

To gain official access to schools in areas of Bhil habitation, I sought permission from the Department of School Education in Madhya Pradesh. I was granted permission to visit eight government schools in Bhagwanpura and Jhiranya blocks. Bhagwanpura and Jhiranya blocks have the highest percentage of Scheduled Tribes (87.13% and 80.23% of the total population respectively, GOI 2015: 43) and lowest literacy rates (36.46% and 34.04% respectively, Ibid.: 54) in the district. According to the census report, most people in the two blocks work as cultivators or agricultural labourers (GOI 2015). Figure 1 shows the two blocks, Bhagwanpura and Jhiranya, in the Khargone district where data was collected.

[7] Ethnographic research prioritises description, subjectivities and meaning construction. See LeCompte and Preissle (1993: 39-44).

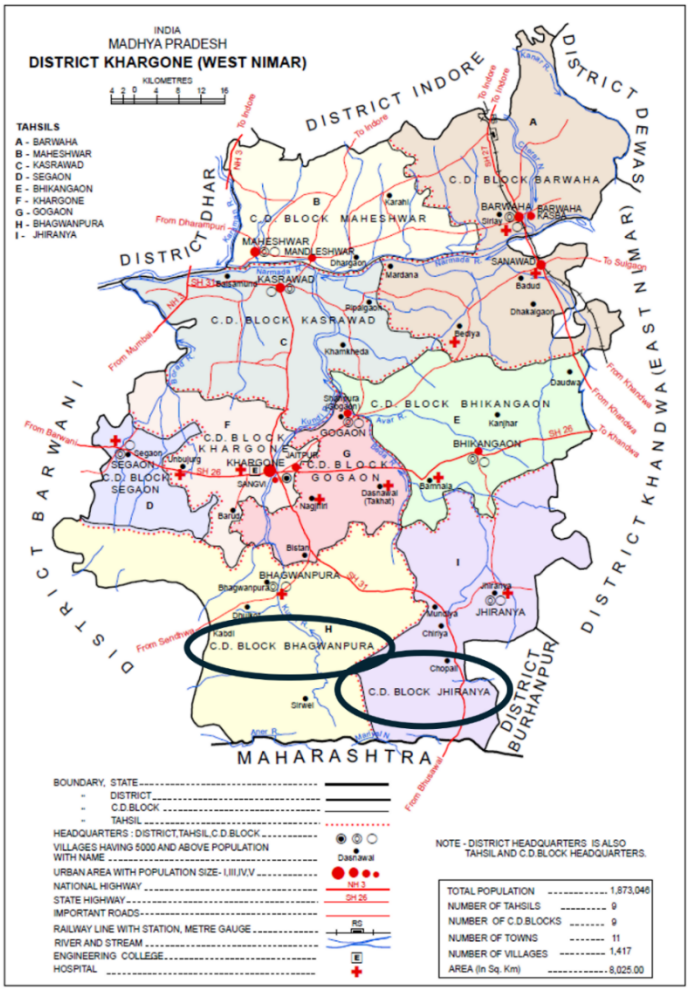


Figure 1: Khargone and Environs [Adapted from the District Census Handbook on the Khargone district published as a part of the national census (GOI 2015)]

To reach Khargone, the closest connecting point for air and rail transport is the city of Indore, an urban centre and industrial hub in Madhya Pradesh, situated at a distance of 127 kms. The blocks where the study was conducted are completely rural and the villages are not accessible through motorable roads. One must walk for 2-3 kms to reach the villages where the schools are located. In one case, to reach the school, I had to cross a shrunk river that swells up during the monsoons and forms a barrier between children and school. As the Bhils in this area live in *faliyas* (or small hamlets), the village school is often located at a considerable distance from their homes and the journey from home to school and vice-versa is a long and an arduous one for most children, especially girls.

I utilised content-based tasks and projective techniques to find out how Bhil children in this area conceptualised history. Hindi was used for all interactions as it was the medium of instruction in the schools. The children were asked to respond to three tasks. The tasks were finalised after consultation with a local teacher from one of the schools in Bhagwanpura. Thereafter, I conducted a pilot in another school in the same block based on which I reduced the number of questions and modified the language of a few of them. For instance, after a suggestion from the local teacher, I had initially planned to also ask children about the rulers who had governed the region in the past. However, I abandoned the idea after the pilot as none of the children were able to respond at all.

The first task sought children's response to the term *itihaas*[8] (literally, history) and recollection of historical concepts. I used the term after consultation with the teachers. I was told that children had studied *itihaas* as a part of their social science syllabus. The term had also been mentioned several times in the official school textbooks from Grade VI onwards. In the second task, I asked them what they knew about the history of their village and the source of that information. According to the NCF-2005, history teaching must include a balance between the national perspective and the local, enabling children to 'develop a critical understanding of their social reality' (NCERT 2005: 32-33)[9]. Therefore, the task was intended to find out what Bhil children knew about the history of their region from the structures of knowledge acquired at school. Finally, the third task used a projective technique[10] in which an image of the Taj Mahal,[11] an architectural marvel built during the Mughal period, was shown to children and their responses to questions related to the details associated with the Taj Mahal were recorded. As children had already studied about the Mughal empire[12] in Grade VII it was expected that they would be able to respond to this question. Taj Mahal, along with being a symbol of a great empire, is a universally admired structure that is globally and nationally viewed in close association with the Indian nation. Familiarity with the details about this heritage could give a glimpse into the extent to which Bhil children could relate with the national past through heritage as a site of learning (NCERT 2005).

After finalising the tasks, I visited seven schools over a span of two months (February to March 2024). The schools were two- or three-room structures with children from Grades I to V sitting in one room and those from Grades VI to VIII sitting in the other. The schools had a maximum of two teachers, one for primary grades (I to V) and the other for middle grades (VI to VIII). The lack of separate classrooms for different grades and the shortage of teachers was a common feature across the schools that I visited. Additionally, the infrastructure in these schools was dismal with dimly lit interiors, bare walls with paint coming off, and no books or other teaching-learning materials.

I interacted with all the children present in the schools studying in Grade VIII. Children from Grade VIII were selected as participants for the study because, till Grade VIII, the Fundamental Right to Education is a constitutional guarantee for a free and compulsory education. Beyond it, education does not remain a fundamental right. Several children drop out of school after Grade VIII (GOI 2022). Hence, for many children from disadvantaged groups, formal education attained till Grade VIII is the only experience of formal knowledge (Rajak 2023). The group was suitable to ascertain whether compulsory schooling had enabled children with social science concepts and knowledge necessary for effective and critical socio-economic participation. Another reason for conducting the study with Grade VIII children was that they would have

[8] In ancient India's literary tradition, the term *itihaas* was used to refer to a 'comprehensive concept about the past' which was constituted by mythologies, historical narrative, and genealogies (see Mukherjee 1994). In modern Hindi language, *itihaas* means 'history'. It was in the latter context that the word was used in the tasks.

[9] Similar recommendations have been made in the National Curriculum Framework for School Knowledge (NCERT 2023: 263-268). It recommends that the local history and regional history constitute 20% and 30% respectively of the history curriculum in the Middle Stage (Grades VI to VIII).

[10] Projective techniques allow participants to express their thoughts freely in response to verbal or visual stimulus materials (see Catterall and Ibbotson 2000).

[11] Taj Mahal, situated on the banks of River Yamuna in Agra, is a mausoleum built by Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century in the memory of his favourite wife. Shah Jahan's remains also lie beside those of his queen. It is an important symbol of the Mughal empire and an architectural marvel. It is also a popular tourist destination in the current times.

[12] The Mughal empire, helmed by a dynasty with Turkic-Mongol origins, governed a significant part of the northern Indian subcontinent 16th and the 18th centuries. Thereafter, the Mughal emperor continued to hold an increasingly reducing power till the middle of the 19th century.

studied social sciences[13] for six years and it was expected that they would have developed a certain level of understanding about history.

I was able to seek responses from a total of 30 children. The interactions with children were conducted within the school premises and in the presence of their teachers. In every school, there was an average of four children in Grade VIII. Although the school records showed a greater number of students enrolled, I found only a few children were present in the school. The discrepancy pointed towards a rampant absenteeism. This was the trend in all schools that I visited. On this matter, when I spoke to the teachers and visited the homes of a few children, I found out that children's engagement in farm work, domestic responsibilities, and migration of families in search of livelihood were the primary factors that kept children away from school.

For the analysis of children's responses, I adopted the method of thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in the children's ideas (Riger and Sigurvinsdottir 2016). The analysis involved continuous revision of themes and creation of new ones. In case of unique and outlier response, a new category was created so that all the responses were represented. Based on children's responses, the study draws inferences on the pedagogical processes adopted in the classrooms amidst the broader curricular aims of education to foster critical perspectives amongst learners by studying the local and the national processes in tandem with one another.

## 4. Analysis

Learning about history helps children draw connections with the past and view the present as contingent on the events and processes that had unfolded in the earlier times. Children learn to step into newer contexts and reflect upon processes and events from varied perspectives. For Bhil children, learning about the history of their community amidst the social, political and cultural processes that shaped history at the national and the global level could be an empowering experience against historical and contemporary injustices meted out to Adivasis. However, the responses of Bhil children point towards a complete absence of engagement with history learning at school.

### 4.1 The Concept of History

The findings were unexpected as most children had not heard the term *itihaas* before. The general responses on this task paint a grim picture of learning of history in schools in this area. Their responses tabulated in Table 1 show that eight years of compulsory schooling had not enabled them to grasp what was history or develop any perspectives towards the past.

[13]Social science is a school subject in all government schools and several private schools in India. It includes the disciplines of history, geography, political science and economics. The constituent disciplines are taught under the broader umbrella of social sciences, rather than as separate subjects till Grade X.

| Familiarity with history | Number of children (n = 30) | | | **Percentage** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls (n = 15) | Boys (n = 15) | Total | |
| Don't know | 6 | 6 | 12 | **40** |
| Never heard the word '*itihas'* (history) | 4 | 5 | 9 | **31** |
| जो बीत गया है उसे इतिहास कहते हैं। (What has passed by is history.) | 0 | 2 | 2 | **8** |
| महान लोगों के बारे में पढ़ा है। (Study about great people.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| याद करके बताते हैं। (Memorise and recite) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| पाठ का नाम। (Name of chapter) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| प्रश्न उत्तर लिकते हैं। सर लिखवाते हैं। (We write questions and answers. Sir makes us write.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| 'अतीत' पुस्तक रहती है। (There is a book titled 'Past') | 0 | 1 | 1 | **3** |
| इतिहास पुस्तक का नाम है। (*Itihaas* is the name of the book.) | 0 | 1 | 1 | **3** |
| जो मैम पढ़ाती हैं। (Whatever Ma'am teaches.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |

Table 1: Children's Understanding of History

The responses in Table 1 indicate that 71% of the children either did not know or they had never heard of the term '*itihaas'* (history) before. Several others mentioned book, chapter, memorising, writing question and answers, and whatever their teacher taught. Their responses did not reflect any engagement with the discipline, let alone a critical one.

Children's unfamiliarity with the term reveals a lot about the pedagogical approach adopted in the classroom. The responses point towards an educational process that has failed to develop fundamental perspectives towards history and its processes. It reveals that question-answers, memorising the content and reading textbook chapters remain significant components of the pedagogical processes. Children in this area are made to write question answers and memorise them for the examinations, without comprehension, let alone analysis. However, it seems that even the process of memorising and copying is not meticulous. It can be inferred that a 'textbook-culture'[14] (Kumar 1988: 452) that prevails in most Indian schools has entered their discourse but has not become a culture yet. Children's responses indicate that the teaching and learning of history and social sciences remains centred around the prescribed textbook and preparation for examinations. However, even the textbook is not studied seriously in schools in this part of Khargone. There is no real engagement with historical concepts. When asked to recall what they had studied about the past, many of them could not list a single theme that they remembered. A few responded by recalling the names of random themes or reproducing fragments of what they had memorised in the classroom. A few of them said that it involved studying about great people, kings and emperors. However,

[14] In 'textbook culture', a term coined by Kumar (1988), teachers have little autonomy over the organisation and pacing of the content. Resources apart from the textbook are not available in schools and textbook is considered a sacred authority. Even assessment, in the form of year-end examinations, is based on the textbook content.

none of them was able to list any names. Three children recited what they had memorised a while ago. Two of them mentioned the collection of information by historians in syntactically incorrect Hindi and another defined who a foreigner was. One of them said:

> इतिहासकार इस काल के बारे में सूचनायें इकठी करना। *(Historians collect information from this period)*

Another said:

> "समाज या संस्कृति का अंग न हो जो विदेशी कहलाता है। अतीत में विदेशी उसे माना जाता था जो जानते नहीं थे। परदेसी या अजनबी कहा जाता था।" *(Who is not a part of the society or culture is a foreigner. In the past, foreigner was one who was not known. He was called an outsider or stranger.)*

The child kept repeating the same sentence in response to every question. This indicates that she could only express fragments of what she had memorised. Kumar's (2005) contention that memorisation is a strategy used by children against material that they cannot understand or find meaningless seems plausible here. Despite the curriculum undergoing an epistemic shift 20 years ago to focus on multiple perspectives towards interpreting history (NCERT 2006a[15]), the education provided to Bhil children in Bhagwanpura and Jhiranya has not enabled this. Children find historical knowledge difficult to grasp and irrelevant to their lives. The overarching commonality amongst all the responses was that they did not display any sense of connection between the learner's life and the knowledge provided by the school.

The schools studied are merely 'socialising' (GOI 1993:[16] 4) them to prepare for examinations, which require reproduction of the textbook content. In the case of Bhil children, even the textbook-based examination preparation does not seem to be happening with sincerity. In the absence of serious learning processes in the classroom, attaining broader aims of education such as fostering creativity, engagement with heritage, cultivation of capacities and skills and engagement with culture[17] seems too optimistic. The content is being taught as 'a densely packed box of informations' (Ibid.: 9). Knowledge and ideas of history are packed inside the textbook as objective facts. The content is unquestionable and distant from Bhil children's lives. Although the school textbooks were developed from an open-ended, multilinear perspective after the National Curriculum Framework 2005, the approach of teachers towards the subject remains the same. The content in textbooks is seen with finality. Amidst this, Bhil children's experiences and oral traditions are not considered an acceptable form of knowledge, alienating them from learning processes at school.

[15] When the National Curriculum Framework 2005 was developed, it was accompanied by the composition of a National Focus Group on the Teaching of Social Science. The position paper published after the deliberations of this group stressed upon the necessity of adopting multiple perspectives and plurality in the teaching of social sciences (which included the discipline of history).

[16] A national advisory committee was set up by the Government of India in 1992 to suggest ways to reduce the academic load on school students. The committee's report 'Learning Without Burden' brought to light the frustrating and meaningless experience of learning history in schools, along with other subjects, that does not provide the possibility for interpretation or construction of arguments. Its findings continue to remain relevant for school education.

[17] See NCERT (2006b: 2-5).

## 4.2 History of the region

Bhil children are a part of a long historical tradition. Bhils have a history of interaction with Rajput and Maratha kingdoms, and negotiation and resistance to the colonial forest policies. However, their histories are not a part of the official school syllabus. The NCF-2005 recommended that education must be contextual to the child's environment, and it emphasised upon "situating learning in the context of the child's world, and of making the boundary between the school and its natural and social environment porous" (NCERT 2005: 30). To understand whether the classroom processes and the teacher had enabled children to develop locally relevant ideas about history, I asked children what they knew about the history of their region and where did the learn about it. To the first question, most children could not respond at all. They could not comprehend what I was asking. The confusion was visible on their faces. A possible reason could be the unfamiliarity of children with the word *itihas* (history), as also discussed in the previous sub-section.

It is evident that learning history at school has not led most Bhil children to develop any substantial ideas or understanding towards the struggles of their group. School has been unable to offer an experience of learning history that children find relatable to their lives. To simplify, I asked children what was there in the village when their grandparents and great-grandparents were young and living there. Interestingly, this question brought several responses from the children. When the word *itihaas* was not used, more children responded.

| Children's responses | Number of children (n = 30) | | | **Percentage*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls (n = 15) | Boys (n = 15) | Total | |
| Don't know | 4 | 9 | 13 | **43** |
| हमेशा से गांव यहीं है। (The village has always been here.) | 3 | 5 | 8 | **26** |
| जंगल था। (There was a forest) | 4 | 5 | 6 | **20** |
| पहले अलग तरह से चलता था। (Earlier, the things were different.) | 3 | 0 | 3 | **10** |
| पहाड़ थे। (There were hills.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| इंसान बदल गए। (People have changed.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| जिला खरगोन छोटा था। (The district Khargone was smaller.) | 0 | 1 | 1 | **3** |
| पहले रोटी मिर्च खाते थे। (Earlier, people ate bread with chillies.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| कुछ भी नहीं मिलता था। खाना भी नहीं मिलता था। (People did not get anything. They did not even get food.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| पहले कुछ भी नहीं था। (Nothing existed earlier.) | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |

*The total percentage exceeds 100 as many students mentioned more than one idea.

Table 2: Ideas on what the village was like when the child's grandparents were young

They recounted what was there in the village roughly 40 years ago. While 43% of the children responded that they did not know, many of them displayed a historical sense in recollecting what they had heard about the village's past. Approximately 26% said that nothing had changed, and the village had always been there. Another 14% said that there was a forest where several animals used to live. A few of them said that the economy, people, and food habits had changed. One said:

> "गांव था। पहले अलग तरह से चलता था। ढाई रुपए का सिक्का चलता था। अब सौ का भी चलता है। इंसान बदल गए। पहले इंसान अलग थे। पहले रोटी मिर्ची खाते थे, अब दाल रोटी खाते हैं।" *(It was a village. Things used to be different earlier. Coins of Rs 2.5 were used. Now, 100 rupees are used. People have changed. People were different earlier. They used to eat bread with chillies, now they eat lentils with bread.)*

Although the responses cannot be taken as a true representation of historical events and processes, they do point towards historical imagination by Bhil children in these areas of Khargone. They could conceive of the past as a time different from the present. Children were cognisant of the forces of continuity/change between the past and present, which points towards the presence of 'historical thinking' (Andrew and Burke 2007). The findings indicate that despite not knowing the term *itihaas,* they have developed a historical consciousness.

To further find out about the role of school in developing a perspective towards the past, I asked children where they had learned about these ideas. Their responses to this question led to an interesting finding.

| Children's responses | Number of children (n = 30) | | | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls (n = 15) | Boys (n = 15) | Total | |
| No Answer | 10 | 13 | 23 | 77 |
| Grandparents told me | 2 | 2 | 4 | 13 |
| Parents told me | 3 | 0 | 3 | 10 |

Table 3: Children's responses on the source of information on their region's past

77% of the children did not give an answer while the rest said that they know these because their parents or their grandparents told them. Table 3 makes for important data as none of the children mentioned school, teacher or the name of a book. Teachers have been unable to initiate a discussion on the issues of local histories and identity. The school curriculum has not opened a space for local issues. Teachers have not engaged with the local context of children and have not introduced them to ideas that are relevant and useful for Bhil children in their everyday routine. Home remains the source of information that children find valuable and worth remembering. Bhil children display an imagination and construction of the past based on oral tales and folk narratives learned at home. Despite the policy-level curricular emphasis on weaving local oral histories into the regional and national histories (NCERT 2005), the structural limitations of schools and the lack of training of teachers has not enabled them to adopt the pedagogical strategies recommended in the curriculum framework.

## 4.3 A Popular Symbol from Indian History

In the last and final task, children were shown a picture of the Taj Mahal and were asked questions about what it was, where it was, who built it and why. Made from white marble with intricate pietra dura stonework designs, Taj Mahal has been recognised as

a structure of architectural excellence. It also signifies the assertion of political power. According to Koch (2005: 128), Taj Mahal was built as a testament to the glory and power of Shah Jahan 'with posterity in mind'. Apart from its cultural and historical significance, Taj Mahal is a national symbol with global recognition as one of the wonders of the world. It also receives a large footfall of tourists every day, making it crucial for the economy as well. Additionally, it has been a subject of intense political controversies.[18] Hence, Taj Mahal is an important part of the school curriculum that enables heritage to be viewed as a site for learning (NCERT 2005) and provides an opportunity to draw interdisciplinary connections.

The aim was to examine Bhil children's ideas and knowledge about the Taj Mahal, a popular symbol from India's history and a crucial part of their school syllabus. However, the findings opened new gateways and provided insights into the relationship between school and the larger religious and ideological forces in the matrices of which Bhil Adivasi children in these areas ascribe meanings to structures and symbols.

| Responses | Number of children (n = 30) | | | **Percentage** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls (n = 15) | Boys (n = 15) | Total | |
| Identified and named it correctly | 9 | 5 | 14 | **47** |
| It is '*Mahal*' (can be interpreted as palace or partial name of Taj Mahal) | 2 | 4 | 6 | **20** |
| Never seen it before | 2 | 2 | 4 | **13** |
| It is a *Mandir* or temple | 0 | 2 | 2 | **7** |
| It is *Ram Mandir* (temple for the worship of Hindu deity Ram) | 0 | 2 | 2 | **7** |
| Seen it in the book but don't know the name | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| Seen it in mobile but don't know the name | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |

Table 4: Identification of the Taj Mahal

Table 4 shows that 47% of the children were able to identify and name the Taj Mahal correctly. 20% of the children identified it as *Mahal* which literally translates into palace. However, it can also be interpreted as a partial recollection of the name of Taj Mahal. It is interesting that approximately 14% of the children identified it as a temple. A few of them were very specific about the temple belonging to God *Ram*, a major deity in the Puranic Hindu tradition. More than half of the children were unable to recognise and identify the Taj Mahal, despite its popularity. It points towards ineffective pedagogical strategies in the classroom and lack of resources at school and home to familiarise

[18] In the recent times, India has witnessed a rise of ethnic and religious nationalism that advocates for an exclusive Hindu identity. This involves a conflation between being a Hindu and being an Indian. The project of establishing a Hindu nation involves historical assertion of Hindu supremacy and aggrandisement. The rise of religious nationalism in India has provided a conducive environment for exclusionary arguments that project Muslim rulers as invaders/outsiders and assert Hindu glory in the past and the present. See Kumar (2022), Uhlhorn (2019). In this context, Hindu nationalists such as Purushottam Nagesh Oak have claimed that Taj Mahal was a Hindu temple built for Shiva, a Hindu deity.

children with places outside their immediate lives and evoke interest in knowledge that appears distant.

The next question was related to children's knowledge about the person who built the Taj Mahal. Most children could not answer. Interestingly, 13% said that it was built by Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India. It is possible that his name is familiar to several children through political campaigns, advertisements or media. However, it indicates that school has failed to help children differentiate between the past and the present or develop any informed political perspectives. Associating a contemporary political figure with a seventeenth century structure reveals that schooling in this region has not enabled children to develop holistic perspectives about the past or the present. Additionally, when asked about the location of Taj Mahal, more than half of the children did not know where it was. Several children responded that it was situated in Delhi. It could mean that they associate everything important or larger than life with the city because Delhi is a significant component in their history syllabus, and it is associated with large empires and structures in their minds.

While a few of them were able to recognise the most popular architectural structure in India, they were not aware of any information associated with it. This shows that children only pick up incoherent pieces of information at school, without drawing connections between them. In the absence of any learning materials, they are entirely dependent on the teacher to learn anything, and the teacher has not been able to help them develop independent thought (necessary for intelligent guessing). The structural and pedagogical limitations of the school and a curriculum that ignores Bhil experiences only allow Bhil children in this region to develop fuzzy ideas about historical processes. In the absence of a context-based pedagogy, the abstract nature of knowledge in history alienates children from what they study. The 'learning' experience remains a meaningless one for children and, hence, it is not deemed worth remembering.

Finally, the last question related to the reason why Taj Mahal would have been built. The answers to this question revealed the entry of politically driven religious ideas in the minds of Bhil children residing in this area.

| Children's Responses | Number of children (n = 30) | | | **Percentage*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls (n = 15) | Boys (n = 15) | Total | |
| Don't know | 5 | 9 | 14 | **47** |
| It is a temple/ constructed for worship | 6 | 5 | 11 | **37** |
| For people to travel and visit | 2 | 2 | 4 | **13** |
| For kings to live | 2 | 0 | 2 | **6** |
| Omkareshwar temple | 1 | 0 | 1 | **3** |
| Must be a school | 0 | 1 | 1 | **3** |

*The total percentage exceeds 100 as a few students mentioned more than one idea.

Table 5: Children's knowledge about the reasons behind the building of Taj Mahal

The responses in Table 5 show that almost half of the children could not tell any reason behind the building of Taj Mahal. It is striking that most children who answered the question identified it as a temple of some kind. One child called it the Omkareshwar

temple, which is a popular religious site located near their district. Several others associated Taj Mahal with God *Ram.* One child said:

"राम आये थे वहाँ। लोग दर्शन करने जाते हैं।" *(Ram was there. People go there to see him.)*

The child's response is similar to the lyrics of a song that have been circulating widely on media platforms. The data was collected between the months of January and March 2024, just around the time of grandiose celebrations for the inauguration of the Ram temple in the city of Ayodhya[19], located more than 1000 kms from the Khargone district. During the visits, I observed that the walls of houses in remote villages were painted in a saffron logo stating:

जय श्री राम। मेरा गांव, मेरी अयोध्या। *(Hail God Ram. My village, My Ayodhya.)*

The religious-political narratives in vogue in several parts of India seem to have found an entry into Bhil children's minds in this region. Mythological narratives, with the active support of political players, have intruded the historical imagination of children. The force of these mythical-political ideas is so powerful that, despite being culturally, contextually and spatially distant from Adivasi Bhil children's lives, they have left an impression on the children's minds. Their responses give rise to several important questions: Why are these religious and political ideas more powerful than the equally distant curriculum? To what extent have Hindu religious ideas been entrenched in the Bhil children's minds? Have Bhil Adivasis begun embracing Hindu symbols and deities? While these questions are extremely relevant ones and open possibilities for future research, answering them remains outside the scope of the present study. Yet, it can be argued that when school is a weak institution, unable to develop critical and independent thinking abilities amongst children, populist ideas of 'ethnic nationalism' that attribute significance to primordial religious identities (Jaffrelot 2021: 9), acquire the potential power to sway several people into its fold.

## 5. Conclusions

When children from the Bhil groups in Bhagwanpura and Jhiranya blocks come to school, they bring experiences of extreme poverty and vulnerability with them. School has the responsibility to acknowledge the different experiences children undergo before coming to school and help them build critical perspectives and aspirations. However, the schools under study are weak institutions of 'secondary socialisation' (Berger & Luckmann 1966).[20] The infrastructure of these schools is inadequate and not conducive

[19] The temple for Hindu deity Ram, inaugurated at the city of Ayodhya in January 2024, was the subject of years of political controversy. The Babri Masjid, a mosque built in the 16th century, stood at the site till 1992 when a mob of Hindu nationalists destroyed it. Mythologically, Ayodhya is believed to be the birthplace of deity Ram and Hindu nationalists have argued for decades that the mosque was built after the destruction of a temple. After a long legal battle, the Supreme Court handed over the site to a trust to oversee the construction of a Hindu temple. In the temple's inauguration, thousands of political leaders and public figures were invited. The day marked a half-day holiday in all central government offices, and a festive celebration in most parts of the country. The event has been criticised by several academics, political analysts and journalists for whitewashing the violent past associated with the history of the site. See Purohit 2024, Mehta 2024. For the complex relationship between myth and history in the context of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, see Udayakumar, 1997.

[20] The process of 'secondary socialisation' deals with an already formed self and an internalised world that has been achieved during 'primary socialisation' at a child's home. During primary socialisation, the child internalises reality as the parent's world. However, during secondary socialisation, the child discovers other worlds. Berger and Luckmann (1966: 166-168) argue that it is 'artificial' in nature, less rooted in the child's consciousness and more susceptible to changing notions of realities. During secondary socialisation, specific pedagogical techniques are

for learning. There is an acute shortage of teachers. Additionally, the pedagogical processes do not align with the guidelines of the National Curriculum Framework (neither 2005 nor 2023). Formal education in these schools is not centred around the principles of child-centredness. In fact, no significant teaching takes place. Children merely come to school, sit and, sometimes, copy text into their notebooks. Educational experience is a routine of copying from one place to another.

As a weak institution, school does not become an attractive space for learning. It does not encourage children to overcome their hardships. The schools under question deliver only fragmented bits of information rather than developing any serious or critical perspectives. From children's responses to the tasks, it appeared that the knowledge being taught at school was at odds with children's everyday lives. Against the curricular recommendations made in the NCF, there appeared no connection between what children experienced in their lives as children of migrant labourers and knowledge presented to them at school. Historical knowledge is presented and disseminated in a manner that is distant from children's lives. Learning about Rajputs, Mughals or the British has not allowed Bhil children in this area to build any understanding of the history of their group or draw connections between the two. While a few children have developed a historical consciousness through folk tales and narratives heard at home, school has not helped them acquire any frameworks to understand history.

Bruner (1977: 17) emphasised upon the significance of structure of a discipline through the act of learning. He considered the 'transfer of principles and attitudes', and their continual broadening and deepening essential components of the educational process. He argued:

> Mastery of the fundamental ideas of a field involves not only the grasping of general principles, but also the development of an attitude toward learning and inquiry, toward guessing and hunches, toward the possibility of solving problems on one's own (Ibid.: 20).

The experience of formal learning at school has been unsuccessful in developing general principles and attitudes amongst Bhil children in Bhagwanpura and Jhiranya towards the discipline of history. Their familiarity with history is characterised by a patchy recollection of historical names. The general principles of learning history, such as spatial and temporal context and the significance of interpretation, remain distant and unrealised. Attending school has not enabled the cultivation of an understanding of history amongst children; rather, history remains a fragmented collection of names.

Furthermore, knowledge of certain groups remains missing from the school curriculum. Apple (1990: 43) argued that the problem of educational knowledge pertains to a study in ideology. It involves an investigation into what is considered 'legitimate knowledge' by specific groups and institutions. In the case of representation of knowledge of history in school curriculum, a nation-centric narrative still enjoys precedence. The narratives of past, as experienced by diverse groups, remains missing. As argued by Kumar (1983), tribal children remain invisible in the curriculum. Knowledge of Bhil children has not been considered valuable enough to find space in school curriculum. A curriculum that marginalises Bhil past and experiences, paired with pedagogy limited to mechanical copying from the textbooks does not enable Bhil children to perceive history as a dynamic discipline that can be studied through

required to establish continuities between the realities acquired at home and the new knowledge internalised at school (Ibid.: 163).

interconnections and relationships between different spatial levels of history (local, national and global).

School knowledge must enable children to adopt perspectives towards the historical, social, economic, and political processes that surround them and 'enable all learners to claim their rights as well as contribute to society and the polity' (NCERT 2005: 6). They aim to provide a child the 'ability to think independently and deal with the social forces that threaten these values, without losing her individuality' (NCERT 2006a: v). In the face of school as a hollow institution, children are unable to develop these abilities. The experience of learning history at school has not enabled Bhil children in this region to connect what they hear at home with relevant historical processes. The pedagogical processes adopted in the classroom have failed in helping them to develop coherent structures of historical knowledge. The present study is based on a small sample and it opens possibilities for future research in the field of history pedagogy, curriculum, and politics of knowledge in the context of Adivasi children. The pedagogical, epistemological and sociological findings of this study constitute a beginning to understanding the dynamic and complex interface between Adivasi children's lives and the knowledge being disseminated at school.

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