
UNIT 4 CULTIVATING

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
 - 4.4.1 Cultivation
- 4.2 The Bhil
- 4.3 Bhil Gametias
- 4.4 Bhil Kataria
- 4.5 Gujarat
- 4.6 Bhil, Durgri , Girasia/ Garasia
- 4.7 Bhilala
- 4.8 Bhil Tadvi
- 4.9 Bhil, Vasava
- 4.10 Bhil Barela
- 4.11 Bhil Mina/ Meena
- 4.12 The Gond
- 4.13 The Santhal
- 4.14 Patelia
- 4.15 Let us sum up
- 4.16 Check your progress: possible answers
- 4.17 Suggested reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- assess different views regarding cultivating tribes;
- know about various cultivating tribes;
- access that all necessary elements in an agricultural economy are found among these tribes; and
- affirm that most of the agricultural tribes comprise all strata of society from the feudal chiefs down to the poorest laborers.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Several circumstances led many tribes to adopt a settled or semi-settled way of life and practice cultivation. Their principal occupation is agriculture; initially they were involved in slash and burn or shifting agriculture. The agriculturist tribes practice agriculture along with continuing varying degrees of gathering and hunting. As they started practicing settled agriculture, there came differential

rules of access based on kinship and lineage. Among these tribes, several forms of increasing inequality can also be seen. Settled agriculture is taken up by the tribes of central, western and southern parts of the country.

4.1.1 Cultivation

The base of all activities in human life is economy. It promises food which is the most important need of every living organism on earth. Human beings choose various ways and means to generate different articles for their needs. Activities related to acquiring food differ from community to community. Hence, we see different kinds of tribes - from the migrant, nomadic, hunter-gatherers to cultivators. Many of the tribals are deemed to be good cultivators due to their thinking, hard work and adoption of good agricultural techniques.

Prior to taking to settled agriculture, many tribal communities mainly practiced *jhum* or slash and burn or shifting method of free access to natural resources like forests for productive use and consumption. This was done under the overall regulation of the village community. The system of individual ownership of land is not known.

Due to many reasons such as increase in population, more and more lands reclaimed for cultivation and some forests declared reserved forests by the government, the area of land available for shifting cultivation decreased. One plot of land was required to be kept fallow for ten to twelve years after one *jhum* operation, so that it could be used for *jhum* again. Due to the reduction of land for shifting cultivation, the tribal farmers were forced to reduce the period of leaving the land fallow from three to four years, which meant that the productive capacity of land under shifting cultivation progressively decreased. The tribal people gradually started realizing the superiority of the settled cultivation system. This change signaled the transition from shifting cultivation to settle or peasant farming.

Over time, scholars working on tribal societies in India and their transformation have observed that tribals in India are gradually giving up their traditional occupations and turning into peasants. According to B.B Mandal and A.K. Upadhyaya, the transformation of tribals into settled agriculturists has reduced the status of them all to the lowest rung of peasantry. These include owner operators, share croppers, tenants, landless agricultural labourers and artisans. Others are exploiting them. Scholars like P.K. Bose and J. Pathy feel that a class-differentiated peasant group is emerging among the tribals of Gujarat and Orissa. It is based on individual ownership of and command over productive resources. The exploitation of one group of tribals by another, based on this factor, can also be seen.

The British colonial period witnessed the greatly accelerated process of the absorption of the tribal into the larger society. The tribal economic and social organization at this time was radically transformed due to the introduction of a new legal-administrative set up, land tenure system, forest and excise regulations and the railways. Conditions were created for major changes in tribal economy and social organization and they were drawn into the mainstream of agrarian development by the growth of a money and market economy. They, although relegated to a subordinate position, were part of the structure that was emerging.

According to K.S.Singh, “the colonial system ended the relative isolation of the tribal society, brought it into the mainstream of the new administrative set up, policy and programmes in the region and roped the tribal communities which had been spared the strain of surplus generation into a system lost its unique character like other segment of the Indian society, it too, was transformed by colonialism but in a far more profound sense than has been known so far”.

A.R.Desai also observes that British economic and political policies resulted in uprooting the tribals from their tribal mode of production.

Agriculturist tribals hold the concept of both individual and collective property of which the Khunt Katti land system of the Mundas is a good example. Only the original settlers of the land (Khunt Katti dars) could own the land and while the village forest was enjoyed as common agricultural land, none of it was held privately.

The British tried to make agricultural land alienable and to take over the forest land. Let us attempt to view the process of transformation in the journey of the tribals from their traditional means of subsistence to their ‘peasantization’, the commercialization of forest and agriculture. In the post independence period, the policy of the government has been to encourage peasant-forming among the tribals in replacement of shifting cultivation and other primitive modes of production.

4.2 THE BHIL

The *Bhil* are spread over a large territory of western India and are concentrated in southern Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and northern Maharashtra. As migrant labourers in the tea gardens, the *Bhil* also live in Tripura. According to the 1981 census, they numbered around 7,367,973 and formed the second largest scheduled tribe of India. Though they speak the *Bhil* dialect, they are also well versed in various regional languages such as Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi etc.

The *Bhil* are mainly agriculturists. Due to small land holdings and inadequate irrigation facilities, subsistence is hardly possible by cultivation of land. Qualitatively also, lands owned by them are poor and mostly unfertile. This fact has forced them to come out from their forest enclosures to earn their living by engaging in various activities such as brewing country liquor, working as day labourers on roads and in the forest, doing some hunting and collecting forest produce, as farm labourers and in construction work in their villages. They also domesticate goat, sheep, cows, bullocks and fowl. The women contribute by collecting firewood and fodder from the forest. The *Bhil* are very good hunters. For this purpose they use the bow and arrow and are also fond of fishing.

The *Bhils* maintain a distance from the neighboring groups of people because their indigent hutments, poor agriculture, deprived economic condition and excessive drinking act as a hindrance in developing smooth social relations with other groups in the area. As a result, they remain as social isolates.

The *Bhils* of Banswara are in the process of withdrawing from the centers of civilization which are dominated by the encroaching Rajputs. They are settling

in the relatively rugged desert terrains and have adopted the strategy of unfriendliness to ensure their ethnic survival and have come to be known as an aggressive, hostile group.

The *Bhils* are in a mixed state of 'peasantisation' and 'pauperisation'. In some places they are living in the plains and have somehow improved their economic condition. There they have taken up agriculture as their main source of livelihood. In most other places, due to loss of control over forests and forest-based economies, they are becoming paupers.

There are a number of other groups like the *Bhils*. Let us have a look at a few of them.

4.3 BHIL GAMETIAS

Bhil Gametias are an endogamous group. *Gameti* is the local term used for the head of the *Bhil* villages. They consider themselves to be the original settlers in the area and descendants of the *Bhil* rulers. The area of their concentration is the northern and western part of Udaipur district and part of the Sirohi district of Rajasthan. They are non-vegetarians but do not eat beef and pork. Their staple cereals are maize and wheat and they consume alcohol occasionally.

A few of the *Bhil Gametias* are agriculturists and a large number of them also work as wage labourers in the fields, mines, for landlords, Banias and the professional class. They are found politically active both at village and regional levels but not much progress has been achieved in terms of development.

4.4 BHIL KATARIA

Their name is derived from the habitat in which they dwell and it includes the present Dharwad, Aspur and Ghatol tehsils of Udaipur, Durgapur and Banswara districts of Rajasthan. There are around eighty four totemic clans (*atak*) among them. Some of the *Katarias* own land and are engaged in agriculture. A large number of the remaining earn their livelihood as wage labourers.

4.5 GUJARAT

In Gujarat, the *Bhil* are the largest tribal community. They are divided into major groups such as *Bhil Garasia*, *Vasava Bhil*, *Pawra Bhil* and *Tadvi Bhil*. These groups are further subdivided into a number of minor subgroups. According to the 1981 census, the percentage of *Bhils* recorded as workers was 37.84 and of this number, 50.18% were cultivators and 39.36 percent worked as agricultural labourers.

4.6 BHIL DUGRI, GIRASIA/GARASIA

The forefathers of this *Bhil* community now living in Gujarat had migrated from Mewar. Their concentration is mainly in the Subarkantha District. They speak a dialect of *Bhili – Dungli* - amongst themselves. The *Girasias* are mainly settled agriculturists. Some earn their livelihood as agricultural or non-agricultural labourers.

In Maharashtra, the *Bhil* are predominantly agricultural labourers and cultivators. Even so, hunting and collection of forest produce has been a source of livelihood for some. According to the 1981 census, 49.59 percent were workers, 68.85 percent were agricultural labourers and 23.82 percent were cultivators.

4.7 BHILALA

They are described as a mixed tribe which born of alliances between the immigrant Rajputs and the *Bhils*. Their area of concentration are the Dhulia and Jalgaon districts of Maharashtra. Their primary occupation is agriculture and wage labour supplemented by animal husbandry and the collection of forest produce. *Bhilala* womenfolk perform household chores, agricultural work and collection of forest produce.

A good number of the *Bhila* of Madhya Pradesh own land and are engaged in settled agriculture. Their other source of income is labour for wages. A few of them irrigate their land with water drawn from wells and also use modern agricultural inputs like chemical fertilizers, insecticides, high breed variety seeds etc. They have, in this way tried to improve the level of their agricultural production.

This community of *Bhil* are mostly confined to the Novapur *tehsil* plains of the Dhule district of Maharashtra. Over time they started referring themselves as *Govit* (leader). They believe that their ancestors were warriors in Rana Pratap's army.

Their primary occupation is agriculture whereas agricultural labour is the secondary occupation. The *Mabachi* women also take part in agricultural activities. They do not accept water, food or spouses from particular *Bhil* groups. Their agricultural labourers come from their own as well other communities.

4.8 BHIL TADVI

This group of the *Bhil* has adopted a mixed form of Hinduism and Islam. They inhabit a region covered by the Satpura ranges and forest. Most of them are cultivators and some work as agricultural labourers. A few of them rear sheep while others collect forest produce and sell wood as fuel at the markets. Those who work as labourers are often assisted in this occupation by their children. Their womenfolk do agricultural jobs and animal husbandry in addition to their household duties.

4.9 BHIL VASAVA

The *Bhil Vasave* group is concentrated in the Dhulia Nasik, Jalgaon and Ahmednagar districts of Maharashtra. Their main occupations have been agriculture, animal husbandry, wage labour, gathering of forest produce and assisting their parents in agricultural activities. Nowadays their main economic pursuits are agriculture and animal husbandry. The *Vasave* have come in contact with merchants from other places to whom they sell agricultural products, animal products and domestic animals. A small number of agriculturists have irrigation facilities through water from wells. They use compost and synthetic fertilizers.

4.10 BHIL BARELA

This community of *Bhils* is distributed in the districts of Kharegaon, Khandwa, Hoshangabad and Narshimpur of Barel. Their major occupations are agricultural labour, daily-wage labour etc. and they also employ their children as wage labourers. Their women actively participate in rituals and economic activities.

Bhils in Tripura are referred to as *Bhim* and *Pacima*. They work in tea-gardens as labourers and came to Tripura from the west. Most of them are still wage earners in tea plantations. According to the 1981 census, 35.80 percent are workers of which 52.33 percent are agriculturists and 18.67 percent are agricultural labourers.

4.11 BHIL MINA/MEENA

They are believed to be an admixture of the *Bhil* and the *Mina*. They figure as an independent community in the list of the scheduled tribes of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Their main concentration is in the southern part of Udaipur and Dungarpur district. The *Minas* are mainly a rural community. *Vagoli* is their mother tongue which belongs to the *Bhili* group of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. They are non-vegetarians but do not eat beef. Their main cereals are maize and wheat.

Minas are agriculturists or agricultural labourers. Traditionally, land which is controlled individually is their main source of economic activities. 27.89 percent of them are workers and 83.63 percent are agriculturists which indicate that their primary occupation is agriculture. 6.49 percent of them were recorded as agricultural labourers.

The number of *Minas* in Madhya Pradesh is very small and, of their total population, 47.46 percents were workers. 41.41 percent of them were cultivators while 43.02 percent were agricultural labourers.

4.12 THE GOND

The homeland of the *Gond* extends from the Satpura range down to the Godavari, from Uttar Pradesh and north Bihar to Andhra Pradesh. They established political power, founded states and had influence over large tracts of land. K.S. Singh observes that “As a large, wide-ranging heterogeneous, stratified society, the *Gond* demonstrate a range of cultural variations which extended from the most primitive to fairly advanced states.” Their northern region shows an advanced degree of acculturation whereas the southern area remains least affected by external influences. According to the 1981 census, 48.04 percent of their population is recorded as workers, 65.26 percent as cultivators and 27.76 percent as agricultural labourers. It shows that they are mainly engaged in the agricultural sector of the economy. In Maharashtra, 50.50 percent of their populations were workers of whom 38.34 percent returned as agriculturists and 47.36 percent as agricultural labourers. Their mother tongue *Gondi*, belongs to the Dravidian family of languages.

Agriculture is the base of the *Gond* economy. Most of them are ploughmen and animal husbandry is also practised. K.S. Singh notes., “through the traditional

occupation of agriculture and animal immemorial, nevertheless, these have of late, started facing mounting pressure due to the large scale immigration of people into their land.”

Presently, the *Gonds* of central India are engaged in different economic activities. They are working as settled agriculturists, forest labourers, agricultural labourers, wage labourers, skilled labourers etc. Land and water, which are the resources of the settled agriculturists, are controlled by individuals. The *Gonds* sometimes cultivate forest land which is controlled by the government. Among the *Gond*, however, the *Raj Gonds* are the main land-owning community. It is only the men who plough the land and the women undertake related agricultural activities which amount to around seventy percent of total agricultural operations. The *Gond* women are experts in transplantation of paddy. Along with this, they participate in animal husbandry, collection of fuel, arranging for potable water and other economic activities. They mainly grow *kado* and *kutki* (millet), paddy, wheat, *jowar*, *tur*, *urad*, gram, *alsiand*, *ramtilla* etc. They have established direct links with the local markets where they sell their produce for cash. They also sometimes sell their products to the *Baniya* and *Teli* who are business communities in the area where they are engaged in agricultural labour. They are mostly landless and it must be noted that every *Gond* who owns land is not able to meet his requirement and thus has to go to other areas for jobs during plantation and harvesting. The system of child labour is prevalent among the *Gond*.

The *Gonds* of Andhra Pradesh are mainly rural. They are non-vegetarians and eat beef and pork. They also consume roots and tubers beside the staple cereal, *jowar*. In the past, the *Gond* of Andhra Pradesh used to be shifting agriculturists. Now they have taken to settled cultivation. 51.54 of them returned as workers according to the 1981 census. 50.52 percent were engaged in agriculture while 44.94 returned as agricultural labourers. Their women play an active part in all economic activities.

In Bihar, 87.75 percent of the *Gond* live in rural areas. They are confined mainly to the western part of Chhota Nagpur plateau in the district of Gumla and Singh Bhum. Coupled with hunting and food gathering, cultivation has been their main occupation. The 1981 census returned 32.53 percent of them as workers of which 47.99 percent were agriculturists and 31.04 percent were agriculture labourers.

In Orissa most of the *Gond* live in rural areas. Their distribution is all over the western part of the state, but mainly concentrated in the Kalahandi district. They are primarily cultivators. Some of them collect forest produce and sell them locally. At some places they still retain the practice of shifting agriculture. Out of the persons returned as workers according to the 1981 census, 60.11 percent were cultivators while 32.70 percent were agricultural labourers.

This group constitutes the erstwhile ruling segment. The prefix *Raj* signifies their association with the *Gond* kingdom. They eat cereals like white rice and *jowar* etc. and their economy are mainly based on land cultivation, animal husbandry and daily wage earning. The cultivators use chemical fertilizers and insecticides.

4.13 THE SANTHAL

The *Santhal* make up the third largest tribal community of India. Their distribution is spread over the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Tripura and their

highest concentration can be seen in the Raj Mahal hills of Bihar and neighbouring areas. K.S. Singh describes them as the largest, most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India. Amongst themselves they speak *Santhali* but with others they communicate in Hindi or in Bengali. They are divided into twelve patrilineal, totemic clans. 36.95 percent of their population returned as workers according to the 1981 census of whom 66.56 percent were agricultural labourers.

Earlier, their traditional occupation was hunting and gathering. This has now changed to settled agriculture and wage labourer. They may be considered among the first who waged a peasant war in tribal India. In 1855-66, the *Santhal* uprising, directed against the outsiders (*diku*) shook the colonial administration. In the 1870s a social reform movement known as the *Khaswa* movement took place. The participants in this movement today survive in three groups of *Bhagate*. The *Santhal* also took part in the treed on struggle. From 1940s onwards, major sections of the *Santhal* became involved in the *Khand* movement.

4.14 PATELIA

The above descriptions of various tribal communities show that among them it is the settled cultivators using the plough and draught cattle who account for a greater number. Also the workers are recruited mainly for the plantations and industries. The larger tribes, such as *Bhils*, *Santhals*, *Gond*, *Oraonc* and *Mundas*, which number about a million people each, are all settled agriculturists and have remained so for generations. N.K. Bose finds that many of them are classified labourers and workers in certain other primary types of occupations. A simple but definite definition of labour is present in their villages. All the necessary elements of agricultural economy viz. cultivators, household specialization in crafts such as basket making, oil pressing and black smithy are found among these tribes.

Andre Beteille, on the basis of his work in Rachi and Hazaribagh districts finds that the inhabitants of these villages corresponded very closely to the ordinary meaning of peasants. He found these people outwardly no different from poor villagers found any here in rural Bihar or West Bengal.

The main characteristics of these tribal economics match those conceptualized by Teodor Shanin for peasantry. They are:

- 1) The central importance of the family unit. Among the tribal people, it is really the family which is a principal component of both production and consumption. As cultivators, individual families act as units of production on the land which they themselves control or on land owned and controlled by others. Both tribal men and women jointly share agricultural work. In some Hindu and Muslim families of a high status however, only men do the agricultural work.
- 2) Most of the tribal families are engaged in settled agriculture and this constitutes for them the major means of livelihood. It also provides the main part of their consumption needs. Their agriculture has been primarily subsistence agriculture.
- 3) These tribals more or less live in fairly small and stable local communities.

- 4) Shanin talks of the underdog position of the peasantry and their domination by outsiders. In all stratified societies, peasants occupy a subordinate position. In the context of a highly stratified Indian village, their exploiters are often from within the village itself. We see that the tribal agriculturists in India have been exploited from outside for quite a long period.
- 5) In India there are a number of tribals who differ very much from each other. Some of them correspond to peasants, others do not. Even in a single tribe, one finds many divisions - some of them clearly being peasant while others are not.

Most of the tribals mentioned are settled agriculturists. There is peasant division of labour within the family. They live in villages along with artisans from whom basic non-agricultural requirement is resourced.

It is evident that a substantial number of tribal people are peasants. N.K. Bose was inclined to stress the continuity between shifting cultivators like *Jaungs* and *Savaras* and settled agriculturists like *Mundas*, *Oraons* and *Santhals*.

Bailey feels that both caste and tribe are also being merged into a different system. Andre Beteille notes that this is an agrarian system whose base consists of a heterogeneous body of peasants cut up into various other linguistic categories.

Studies on the life of the cultivating tribes appear not to view 'tribe' and peasant as mutually exclusive categories. S.C. Roy freely refers to the *Oraon* and *Munda* villagers as peasants. Furer Haimendorf analyses the peasant culture of the *Raj Gond* of Adilabad and Bailey also has characterized the knods of Orissa as peasants.

S.C. Roy differentiates the *Oraons* according to their tenurial status and states that both the Hindu and Muslim groups of artisans who were *Mundas* in a purely *Khuntkatli* village are becoming scarce and broken *Khuntkatli* villages are coming up. This is happening due to two reasons - one is the emergence of individual ownership of land as opposed to control by the local lineage and, secondly, the inroads made by money lenders and landlords into *Munda* areas.

C.V on Furer Haimendoryf in his study of the *Raj Gond* of Adilabad finds that they do not form a ruling class or even a class of privileged economic status, but an entire tribal group comprising all strata of society from feudal chiefs down to the poorest labourers. They widely practiced shifting agriculture in earlier times. They are peasants in the process of becoming increasingly articulated with a market economy.

N.K. Bose point out that in the past, the *kol* or *Munda* tribe practiced some form of slashes and burn agriculture. He further notes that our earliest records of the *Munda* show them as settled in permanent villages and practising plough cultivation.

4.15 LET US SUM UP

The various tribes, all over India, have now gradually turned to a permanent, settled life as cultivators of land – owned by them or controlled by others – from

a nomadic existence. Once known to be hunter-gatherers and practitioners of a slash and burn method of agriculture, they have now settled in villages and farm the land besides rearing animals and fowl.

4.16 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) What do you understand by Cultivating Tribes?
- 2) Write a note comparing the *Gond* and the *Santhal* tribes.
- 3) Analyse the main reasons for the changeover of the tribes from their traditional occupations to a settled life as agriculturists.

4.17 SUGGESTED READING.

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