



Research Paper

## Role of Barwa (Shaman) In the Lives of Present Day Bhil Tribesmen of Western India - A Study in Anthropological Perspective

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*Despite the entry of the elements of modern life and education into their society, the Bhil tribesmen of Western India continue to hold firmly to their traditional beliefs and practices. They place complete faith in their shaman (Barwa) whose realm of activities influence the entire life cycle of a Bhil. Traditionally the Barwa has been playing a key role in birth, healing, fertility and death. He mediates between individuals in difficulty as well as the supernatural beings controlling and influencing human fate in order to relieve people from anxiety. The article, based on field observations made in several villages of the tribal belt of western India, attempts to provide an overview of the major roles of a Barwa and narrates the belief-system and traditions related to shamanism prevalent among the Bhils.*

**(Key words):** Shaman, Shamanism, Bhil, Indian-Tribe, Belief)

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The third largest tribal group in India inhabiting the western part of the country (Shukla 1986), Bhil tribesmen possess a unique style of self-representation. Myths collected by various scholars such as (Bannerman 1902); (Crooke 1909); (Venkatachar 1933); (Kopper and Jungblut 1976) as well as written in *Puran* (Vishnupuran 1990) explore the origins of the tribe that include stories of wicked deeds, incestuous unions, foolish acts and misfortunes. The most popular myth of the origin of Bhil tribe narrates that the first man and the woman of the present day human race were brother and sister. During *jal-pralay* only two of them managed to survive with the help of a fish named *Rohit*. God told them to repopulate the world and they married. They had seven sons and seven daughters. God presented a horse to first-born son and asked him to rule the world. Being unable to ride the horse the son abandoned that and went to forest. He and his sons became foresters and started Bhil tribe. The second popular myth explains that one day god *Bhairo Dev* gave his favourite bull named *Vrishbha* to one of his sons and asked him to plough the earth. Instead of obeying his father, the son killed the bull and ate that. Angry *BhairoDev* dispelled his son to the dense forest. While living in forest the son married to a forest woman. The descendent of that son became the Bhil tribesmen. It seems that the first myth is influenced by the myth of Hindus of India but the second myth is independent from any influence.

Over the years, a caste, which was considered above them named the Rajputs (Hindu) as well as Muslims influenced the Bhil tribesmen, yet they had been able to retain their own distinct customary ways of living and rituals (Mann 1978; Nath 1960; Tod 1920; Vidyarthi and Rai 1985; Vyas, et al. 1978).

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bhil tribesmen practised a shifting cultivation. With the advent of British rule in India, they were forced to settle down and are now settled cultivators (Ghurye 1973). The lands of the Bhil are mainly unproductive barren slopes. Cultivated year after year they are so eroded that production is minimal. The bulk of the population can barely meet the minimum necessities of life from the agrarian income available to them. Both government and NGO groups are aware that the Bhil tribesmen face economic crisis but disagree on a solution.

The Bhil tribesmen have preserved many cult traditions and ceremonies which attempt to explain and control the vagaries of fortune and demonstrate how *Barwa* is important for them. Human suffering and other calamities are attributed to the wrath of gods, evil spirits, and witches. As a relief mechanism against such forces, they have shamans, known as *Barwas* in their society. Though many *Barwas* can live in one village, the

position of the leading *Barwa* of the village is given to only one person. Others are known as trainee *Barwas* and they are strictly forbidden to perform public ceremonies. Sometimes villagers do go to trainee *Barwas* for personal help but generally, they avoid doing so. The leading *Barwa* of the village is elected by the villagers and the older *Barwas* on the basis of his power and popularity. *Barwas* of all the villages are considered similar in the talents expected of them such as in curing diseases, controlling evil spirits, establishing communication with gods and ancestral spirits, and protecting village from any calamity. If the leading *Barwa* of any village dies, villagers elect a new leading *Barwa* from the group of trainee *Barwas*. Besides the leading *Barwas* of the villages and trainee *Barwas*, the Bhil tribesmen have one Head *Barwa*. The Head *Barwa* lives in an isolated place and except during *Navaratri* (nine nights before festival Dussehra), time does not come before the public. Dussehra is one of the major festivals of India celebrated in the month of September-October by Hindus. Bhil tribesmen celebrate Dussehra in different way. They have nothing to do with Hindu mythological characters Rama and Ravana related with Dussehra.

The division of Head *Barwa* and other *Barwas* depends on the nature of the spirits with whom they come into contact. A Head *Barwa* is supposed to control more powerful evil spirit and thereby able to cure serious disease and solve difficult problem. It is an endeavour in which other *Barwas* may fail. He can see the future in broader perspective with the help of friendly spirits and supreme gods and can predict things more correctly, which other *Barwas* cannot do. A *Barwa* can rise to a higher category as his knowledge of the spiritual world increases as well as when villagers develop faith in him noticing his growing power.

It was observed during field visits that the level of dependency of Bhil tribesmen on their *Barwas* was so great that many of them could not imagine to surviving a day without a *Barwa* in their village. The chief *Barwa's* aid was sought to deal with various events of life such as birth, illness, accidents, cattle health, and good crops. The village *Barwa* helped them by interposing himself on behalf of an individual or family experiencing difficulty or troubles with the supernatural beings controlling or influencing their fate. In short, it can be said that when they wish or feel it necessary to control the world beyond their reach and understand the causes of sickness, distress and misfortune, the Bhil tribesmen turn to the *Barwa*. Not only this, he also guides them in performing and deciding the dates of religious functions such as *Bowni*, *jatar* and *Salawani*. It seems that for them *Barwa* is a term meaning master, healer and religious leader. Villagers claim that a *Barwa* helps them in coming out from any kind of distress. It was observed that among all the roles of a *Barwa* his role as a healer was more important for the villagers. May be the economic hardship of poor villagers who can not afford modern medicine has made the role of *Barwa* as a healer more popular one can conclude. Mann (1978) observed that it was the firm believes of villagers that that while being possessed by a supernatural power, the *Barwa* helped them in curing diseases and other human sufferings caused by malevolent spirits. (Karve 1969) noticed that the major ministration of the *Barwa* on behalf of a sick person consists of magical performances, spiritual interactions and chicken or goat sacrifices (Karve 1969).

During field interview with *Barwas* of all the villages it was noticed that a *Barwa* of today feels it necessary to pursue the villagers for hard work. He knows it well that magic cannot do anything alone. A *Barwa* of today agrees that the *Barwas* of previous years were more powerful. He attributes the decreasing power of *Barwa* to increase in crime and dishonesty in the village. Today *Barwas* well understand that though the tribesmen are poor, they are not ignorant. Education, media, and the work of NGOs have changed the Bhil's perception of themselves. That is why the village *Barwa* tries to convince the villagers not to depend only on magic. It was found on many occasions the village *Barwa* was pursuing the villagers to work harder especially during the celebration of *Akhatij* (when villagers clean their fields for the coming monsoon) and *Bowni* (showing seed ceremony). It seems that in changed situation the present day *Barwa* has also compromised with his position and role. On the one hand the *Barwa* tries to make it clear to the villagers that through magic they can increase the harvest but he also seeks to make them understand that one cannot succeed in his/her practical pursuit without diligence and hard work. However, villagers can fail even after working hard due to black magic or bad luck. In this way, he encourages villagers to be diligent and safeguards his role and position by acknowledging and taking the side of the power of magic.

It was observed that the village *Barwa* does not claim that he can make a person successful with his power, He openly says, 'Success of that kind was possible only in the former years when gods used to reside on the earth' or 'Gone are the days when wishes used to come true by the blessing of anybody'. On several occasions, it was noted that the village *Barwa* honestly claims that he is not as powerful as a god is but he is different from normal human beings. To make himself popular amongst the pupils of younger generations who tend to be little educated or newly educated, the village *Barwa* occasionally watches television, has some knowledge of modern world and discusses cricket, politics and popular movies. For example, he might declare in front of cricket lovers which team will win the match to be played in coming weeks. In November 2002 when young boys were planning to spend time watching a cricket match played between West Indies and India at Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), the *Barwa* of the village of Bhagor told them that the result of the match would be very disappointing for them. The *Barwa's* verdict was true. West Indies defeated India by 136 runs.

Similarly, he discusses with villagers which political party is going to achieve government in coming years. In 2003, the same Barwa declared that in coming years the 'world' (the state of Madhya Pradesh) would be ruled by a woman. Again, he was proved right. It was the first time a woman became the Chief Minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh. Such examples are rare but indicate that a *Barwa* wants to show to younger generation that he knows about the modern world too. This has a psychological impact on the thoughts of the villagers. For them the *Barwa* is a knowledgeable individual who knows everything about the past, present and future, about their village and about neighbouring cities. In general, he does not step out of his traditional roles. May be he does so in fear of lost of his traditional identity.

Any way it can be concluded that the earliest belief system of the Bhil tribesmen allows the *Barwa* to be a strong dominating cultural figure whose rituals are primarily concerned with fertility, healing, death and the alleviation of anxiety. The present article is based on a decade long study of several villages of the tribal belt of western India. An attempt has been made to provide an overview of the many roles of the *Barwa* and narrates the belief-system and traditions related to shamanism prevalent among the Bhils.

## **II. METHODOLOGY AND LOCALE OF THE STUDY**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In order to obtain information about *Barwas* I used both participant and non-participant observations as my principal tools. To know how and from whom *Barwas* receive training in order to gain command over *Barwaism*, interviews were taken from the *Barwas* of six villages and from those who were under training. Group discussion method was also used to understand the role of *Barwas* in the life of villagers. Data were collected from 130 households with a total population of 550 people, consisting of both sexes and different age groups. In addition, books, journals and periodicals were used in researching and writing the article. To present every aspect of the role of *Barwa* more clearly that has been explained under different headings. May be there would be repetition of a few information in a bits but that has been done to explain the case better.

### **LOCALE OF THE STUDY**

The study was conducted in the villages of Alirajpur, Bhagor, Jhabua, Jobat, Meghnagar and Thandla in Jhabua district. Jhabua is the western most district in Madhya Pradesh state in central India. It is a predominantly tribal district and suffers from high rates of illiteracy and poverty. According to the 2001 Indian Census report almost half of the population in the tribal region lives below the poverty line (Indian standard income less than RS 11001 per annum). The tribes like the Bhil, the Bhilala, and the Patelia inhabit the interior of the district and contribute more than 84 per cent of the total population there. The Bhil men have since long adorned the *Teer-Kaman* (bow and arrow), which has been their symbol of chivalry and self defence. Religious practices of tribe men have been influenced by the Hinduism and Christianity; however, belief in shamanism and witchcraft also dominates. The Bhil tribesmen of one village may differ from the tribesmen of another village because of the degree of influence by the dominant neighbouring culture yet one thing is common among them: They all are similar in terms of holding their traditional beliefs and practices.

## **III. BARWA, BARWAISM AND THE BHIL TRIBESMEN**

Leach (1982) claims that the belief in shamans is a worldwide phenomenon. It means Bhil tribesmen are not unique in this respect that they have faith in their *Barwa*. Drury (1989) simply explains that shamanism (*Barwaism*) is applied animism or animism in practice. However, there have been numerous attempts to explain the role of the shaman and we see that the Bhil *Barwa* exemplifies many of the universal characteristics of shamans. We find that image of shaman is full of contradictions. On the one hand he is seen as mentally ill person (Devereux 1980; Radin 1957; Wissler 1931) while on the other hand, many scholars, rejecting the theory that the shaman (*Barwa*) is basically neurotic, have suggested that he possesses certain cognitive abilities that are distinguishably superior to those of the rest of the community (Harner 1973; Lowie 1965). As claimed by the villagers the Bhil *Barwa* is not mentally unwell but possesses special cognitive abilities. As mentioned earlier he has a special access to a defined cosmos. A *Barwa* acts as an intermediary between the sacred and profane worlds, between humankind and the realm of gods and spirits.

Social scientists find that the shaman acts as a mediator between the supernatural and the community, who makes the desire of one known to the other (Basilov 1997; Howard 1986). They simply explain shamanism as a more organized religious system and the shaman is seen as a sacred specialist who connects his community with everything that is sacred giving meaning to life or helping them to achieve ecstasy (Eliade 1964; Myerhoff 1976). The Bhil *Barwa* also acts as a mediator between the supernatural and community members.

According to Drury and Musi, the shaman is a master of spirit entities who can venture to different cosmic planes (Drury 1982; Musi 1997). He is perceived as capable of going into an induced dream by using many means to perform spiritual feats exceeding that which is thought not possible in normal life (Anglure 2001; McClenon 2004; Sansonese 1994). It was observed that the Bhil *Barwas* also possess these qualities.

Researchers have also drawn parallels between shamanistic healing and psychoanalytic cures and have concluded that in both instances efficacious and therapeutic symbols are created, leading to psychological curing (Hammond 1971; Nanda 1987; Strauss 1963; Torry 1995). The shaman is also generally considered as an expert herbalist (Dow 1986; Frust 1994). The Bhil *Barwa's* expertise extends to herbal healing and psychological curing.

Ruth Benedict prefers to see techniques for handling the supernatural as ranging between extremes of 'compulsion' on one hand and what she calls 'rapport' on the other (Benedict 1938). Hoppal comments that shamanism is a belief system involving the acceptance of certain social roles such as a healer, poet or ideologue, or all of those together (Hoppal 1998). Whereas Siikala writes that, the shamanic world is a quite complicated fabric of beliefs, ideas, and concepts and images (Siikala 1998). Stutley concludes, for instance, that spiritual possession is central to all forms of shamanism (Stutley 2003). However, in the society of the Bhil tribe, it was found that similar to the shaman of other societies the *Barwa* is also recognized as having special abilities for entering into contact with spirit beings and for controlling supernatural forces. He can act as a mediator between this world and the other world, firstly by accompanying a soul, secondly by conjuring a spirit.

Bhil tribesmen have no idea about the roles of *Barwas* of the era when their ancestors were shifting cultivators. They guess that may be the *Barwas* of those periods were similar to the present day *Barwas*. However, after going through the folk tales of Bhil tribe it can be concluded that the *Barwas* of those periods were playing important role in celebrating Bhil festivals *jatar* and *Salawani* (Lourdusamy and Sahay 2003). Bhil tribesmen celebrate *jatar* in honour of their supreme god *Wagja Dev* for giving good crops to them and celebrate *Salawani* to make their village safe from diseases and difficulties, which according to them are caused by evil spirits. Playing important roles in these two festivals means during those periods too, the *Barwa* was acting as an intermediary between the humankind and the realm of gods and spirits.

The full *Barwaism* complex (the practices of a *Barwa*) includes some forms of trance experience during which the power of the *Barwa* is augmented. Possession, the invasion of the human body by a god or spirit, is the most common form of a *Barwaism* trance. The *Barwa* goes into a trance by inhaling smoke, beating on a drum or thrashing a bamboo forked shaped musical instrument on the floor, dancing monotonously, singing alone or in chorus, playing his own *damroo* (hour-glass drum) or simply by closing his eyes and concentrating. It was noted that to enter a state of trance the Bhil *Barwa* does not depend on hallucinogenic plants. Whereas, many shamans all over the world do depend on such plants (Vitebsky 2001). It was observed that the trance of *Barwas* begins with rigidity and shaking of the body, sweating, foaming at the mouth, heavy breathing and moving the head round and round. In the state of trance, he acts as a medium, transmitting messages from the ancestors. With the help of friendly spirits, he predicts future events, prescribes cures and gives advice on how people can protect themselves, their cattle, their crops and so forth against the evil intentions of enemies.

Harris comments that an important part of shamanistic performance in many parts of world consists of simple tricks of ventriloquism, prestidigitation, and illusion (Harris 1975). It may be a trick but it works in Bhil society and has a psychological impact on villagers. For instance, while celebrating a religious function there is a custom of the *Barwa*, after concentrating for a time, locating the exact position of hidden idols kept under the ground since the previous year by the villagers. Another example is when the *Barwa* rearranges leaves in an accurate sequence, which villagers have changed at the time, when the *Barwa* goes into trance at the time of worship. Furthermore, by concentrating, and with the help of friendly spirits, a *Barwa* locates a place for digging a successful water well; a difficult task in a hilly area.

After eating meat and consuming liquor in enormous quantities, the *Barwa* performs certain rituals concerning magic and religion to save the tribe in crisis. He provides sick members of his society with a language, which is unexpressed and otherwise inexpressible so that psychic states can be immediately achieved. Overall, he performs important integrating functions for society. Through a wide variety of symbolic acts, his performance brings together various beliefs and religious practices in a way that dramatically reinforces the values of their culture and the solidarity of their society. Through such performances, the participants experience various degrees of ecstasy and there is a release of anxiety caused by various disturbing events affecting individuals or the community as a whole. The natural and supernatural forces with power to do evil are thus brought under control; seemingly, inexplicable misfortune is given a meaning within the traditional cultural pattern and the community is better able to carry out its normal activities. It can be said that similar to shaman in other societies the Bhil *Barwa* is endowed by superhuman power, performing the role of the medium, diviner, worshipper and healer. By and large, the Bhils have great respect for the *Barwa's* role in their community and belief in his spiritual powers.

#### **IV. MAKING OF A PERFECT BARWA**

Although a *Barwa* can achieve religious influence by heredity, personal quest is always an essential element of the steps taken to gain this status. Any man of the tribe interested in learning *Barwaism* is allowed, however; he should be sincere in his approach. It was observed that the villagers firmly believed that those

whose motives were related to wealth, prestige and power could never become a *Barwa* even after ten years of training.

Women, conversely, are denied the right to study to become a *Barwa*. Villagers believe that they are weak and thus lack strength to control the evil spirits. It was explained that a woman cannot physically travel as fast as a man can; this is translated to apply also to travel in the cosmic realm. It is also believed by the Bhil tribesmen that women cannot understand the sufferings, pain and sexual problems of men whilst the opposite is considered possible. Above all, it is believed by the villagers that a woman does not have the mental capacity to understand things that a man can easily.

Gaining command of *Barwaism* requires speciality training, which is provided by older *Barwa*. The nature and length of the training depends on the capability and devotion of the beginner. The process of becoming a *Barwa* is often not a pleasant one (Knecht 2003). As informed by the *Barwas* of the villages Bhagore, Meghnagar and Alirajpur normally the person willing to become a *Barwa* is subjected to a period of intensive training of five years by an experienced *Barwa*, which includes prolonged fasting, seclusion and other ordeals about which they do not want to discuss.

After watching the constancy and temperament of all his sons, the village *Barwa* chooses one for the post. Once he is selected by his father, he has to live according to the prescribed conduct and rules governed by *Barwaism*-training.

The son of a *Barwa*, as well as others interested in learning *Barwaism*, is given the opportunity to learn *Barwaism* during *Navartri* time (nine nights before Dussehra). They all go to the *Head Barwa* as only during this period the *Head Barwa* repeats his *Vidya* and *jantra-mantra* (knowledge and skill of healing) one by one. The sacred tenets of *Barwaism* can be learned only in the night. Both the pupil and the teacher have to follow certain rules during this period. They cannot use a bed, cannot eat food cooked by a woman, and cannot indulge in sex. These are the minimum information that *Barwas* and trainee *Barwas* shared. They do not want to talk in details about the training of *Barwaism*. After consuming large quantities of liquor, the *Head Barwa* begins the incantations of his *jantra –mantra* (magical spells). The skills of shamanism are dealt with one by one and the interested candidates endeavour to grasp them.

On the tenth day of Dussehra, the new *Barwas* have to prove their power to the community. The *Head Barwa* tests his pupils by asking them to name the causes of illness of any person or animal. Villagers come to novitiate *Barwas* bearing a one-rupee note or some maize corns or glass or leaf, which are waved over the head of an ill individual. After watching these things carefully, the new *Barwa* speaks about the illness. First, he mentions the name of the ill person and then the part of the body where the pain is. If a pupil relates accurate information, the *Head Barwa* gives him a blessing by chanting some mantras. Next, the pupil offers gifts of incense sticks, a bottle of liquor, one coconut, one cock and hen to the *Head Barwa*. He then proceeds to sacrifice the cock and the hen in the name of *Kalka Mata*, mixes milk and liquor in one cup whilst in another cup he mixes liquor and blood of the sacrificed animals. After chanting more mantras, he gives both the cups to his pupil to drink. One should drink the liquid of both the cups without hesitation. Finally, the *Head Barwa* keeps his right hand on the head of the pupil and the pupil withdraws to a remote place to repeat all his learnt *Vidya* (knowledge) in a peaceful atmosphere. On the day of *Kalichaudas*, one of the celebrations related to Deewali (festival of light) celebrated in the month of November; one by one, the newly installed *Barwas* are confirmed as a “perfect” *Barwa*.

Generally, *Barwas*, including the Head, the older established practitioner and the novices, all observe a fast during Dussehra and Deewali time. During *Navaratri*, they refrain from eating bread, do not sleep on a *khat* (bed), deprive themselves of sex and eat only fruits. On the tenth day, the village *Barwa* goes to worship *Kalka Mata*. After worshipping, he prepares bread himself with wheat flours and cooks *Khichari* (broth of rice and pulse). After he offers food to a few elder members of the village, he then takes food himself.

## V. THE WEB OF POWER

Most culture’s belief in gods normally also involves belief in ways of communicating with them, either through prayer or divination (Swartz and Jordan 1976). Bhil tribesmen believe their *Barwas* communicate with supernatural powers on their behalf. There are many rituals to ensure good crops, the fertility of domestic animals, the avoidance of illness, and the safety of crops, in which the *Barwa* plays an important role. He can deal with misfortune caused by spirits. People can ask various questions from him when he is possessed and can obtain relief from future-anxiety. One of his important tasks is to give people the vitality considered the foundation of everything in the life of a Bhil.

Bhil tribesmen experience feelings of insecurity because of the uncertainties of the world around them. The fears of epidemic, natural disasters as well as the practice of sorcery and witchcraft sustain *Barwaism*. In order to protect families and communities from misfortune Bhil tribesmen turn to the *Barwa*. They place their lives and the lives of their loved ones in his hands and a *Barwa* must faithfully respect this trust. It is his responsibility to take care of them and generally, he does his best. He dedicates himself to end the sufferings of

the people even at the cost of his own comfort. He identifies the causes of sufferings; he diagnoses illness correctly and prescribes the action that should be taken. One can say that shamanic service has its ethics. Foremost is the responsibility to alleviate sufferings (Dow 1986). This expectation is reflected in the past and current practice of *Barwaism*.

Another important feature of the Bhil *Barwa* is to cure patients who the doctor has unsuccessfully treated. Acting as a 'faith healer' or 'folk-doctor', he performs rituals and prescribes herbal medicines such as ferns, tuber or roots of certain plants, and leaves. If the doctors or practitioners are unable to provide healing, individuals often turn to the *Barwa's* herbs and remedies. Sometimes the *Barwa* communicates with the spirits and suggests propitiation of spirits as remedial measures. This may include *hom*, sacrifice of animals, forcing the villagers to take a vow of seemingly strange or bizarre remedy such as *Gal* (hook swinging) or *Sulghumna* (walking on fire). These festivals are connected to *Holi* (festival of colour). Villagers often relate stories of miraculous healings.

In one significant instance personally related to the author, an ill girl had lost 3 kg in weight within a week and was not taking food or drinking water. The medical doctor was unable to diagnose the cause of her illness and he proclaimed her healthy. Her father came to the *Barwa* for help. He gave her herbal medicine and tied a black coloured thread around her wrist. After two days, she started taking liquid food and soon began to eat solid food. Within a week, she had recovered. One could question whether the girl was in reality initially ill or whether she healed naturally but whatever the case, it was clear the villagers believed this case provided evidence of the *Barwa's* healing power.

The villagers gave another example of the *Barwa* praying *mantras* (magical spells) over an ill cow and then tying a black coloured thread around its neck while she was overpowered by three or four men. He inserted three or four pins, which had been dipped in a liquid in the body of the cow. After half an hour, she excreted dung full of worms and fully recovered.

A notable aspect of the research concerned the dual use of *Barwaism* and more contemporary medical practices amongst the Bhil tribesmen. Educated people go to the doctor at the time of illness and yet do not hesitate to use the *Barwa's* magical objects saying that they do not want to take the risk of not using one. This has a strong psychological impact on the illiterate who solely depend on *Barwas* for any help.

As well as his healing role, the *Barwa* also performs public ceremonies such as *Salawani* (a celebration to remove diseases from the village), *Jware ki badi* (celebration related to *Navaratri* and forecasts about future crops) and *Jatar* (Thanksgiving Day). He also resolves cases of cheating and theft. The verdict given by the *Barwa* is generally accepted by the people.

The *Barwa* is also believed to have insight into the causes of death. In some circumstances rather than suggesting medication, he merely sings and touches a patient either with hands or with leaves of any tree because he believes the individual will pass away. People accept that if the person dies, this was meant to be. After all, the *Barwa* is not himself a god. In such a circumstance, blame is attributed to powerful spirits whereas if the patient recovers, credit goes to the *Barwa*. It was found that sometimes rather than giving medicine to the patient, a thread is tied around the neck or an object after chanting mantras. This has a psychological affect and helps people to recover. Atkinson has concluded that shamanic (*Barwaic*) therapy presumes that human beings possess hidden dimensions to which only shamans has access. A person's life depends on the condition of these vital components of being but a shaman alone can monitor and manage them. In this way, the shaman asserts control over people's lives (Atkinson 1992). Clearly, the role of Bhil *Barwa* is a suitable example of Atkinson's finding.

There are occasions when the sorcery or power of the spirits is considered too strong to defeat and can test the healing potency of any *Barwa*. If the *Barwa* fails to cure a sick person, his reputation suffers and people turn to another *Barwa* for treatment. Furthermore, the *Barwa* is considered to know little about 'black thought' and 'black magic', the domain of the village *Dakin*, *Churel* (harpy), witches.

## VI. AROUND THE LIFE CYCLE AND BARWA

The influence of *Barwa* in the activities of day-to-day living is actually not overly significant; his rituals are generally turned to at a time of crisis. Furthermore, he has nothing to do with the important and elaborate ceremony of marriage or other important ceremonies such as the naming of the child or first hair saving. Nevertheless, he does help in performing different rituals, which a man observes over the course of his life. Though the Bhil tribesmen observe many rituals, the main three are those observed at the time of birth, marriage and death. The belief in the supernatural serves as a foundation for every ritual. Earlier folk-beliefs such as that a new born baby easily becomes the prey of childless witches, evil eyes can destroy the married life of a new couple and the soul of a dead man moves round his near and dear ones at least for up to ten days, are also linked with magical activity. The purpose of which is not only to connect with supernatural powers but also to gain practical aid in the physical world.

Children are considered as gifts of the gods to married couples. Bhil tribesmen believe that supernatural

power plays an important role in pregnancy. If a couple is not with a child after one or two years of marriage, they are said to suffer a curse and they turn to the *Barwa* who can compel supernatural powers to act in some particular and intended way in relation to pregnancy. Herbal medicines are also given either to the wife or to the husband or to both, and prayers and offerings are made to the god by the couple on the advice of the *Barwa*, believing this treatment can be successful.

When a woman becomes pregnant, the *Barwa* ties a thread around her wrist to protect her from evil spirits and advises her not to eat meat, fish, eggs, potato and coconut. The *Barwa* keeps the reasons for this a secret. Villagers guess that the spirit of dead animals may haunt the woman if she were to consume meat, fish and eggs, and certain vegetables and fruits although they are unsure as to the reasons. After delivery, the *Barwa* sacrifices animals in the name of gods and goddesses and the woman is permitted to eat all restricted food items.

After the birth of a child, the *Barwa* uses wooden poles, threads of red, green and yellow colours, and a new *dhoti* (waistcloth) to make a swing. While the newborn baby sways in the swing, the *Barwa* chants *mantras*. Following this, he pours liquor on the earth and sacrifices a cock, a hen and a goat. Family members of the baby offer food to the *Barwa* and his relatives. They present him a new *dhoti*, turban, a few rupees and some uncooked mutton depending on the economic status of the family. In this way, the family members free themselves from any anxiety related to the baby's health. They believe, 'The *Barwa* will take care of the baby'.

After a death, family members wishing to investigate the cause of death can turn to the *Barwa*. This ritual involves one of the family members waving some maize corns over the corpse and then touching it. Those corns are then given to the *Barwa* for analysis to determine the cause of death. He also elects one of the sons of the dead man to perform the death rituals.

The *Barwa* is considered knowledgeable about the deceased person's spiritual future. On the third day after the death, family members examine flour or sands kept near the *diya* (oil lamp) at the place where the person passed away. By the shape of the marks, the *Barwa* hazards a guess about the form the dead man is supposed to take in his next birth providing comfort to grief stricken family members.

## VII. SUPERNATURAL POWER, MAGIC & BARWAISM

Magic is often associated with fetishism. A fetish is an object such as a feather, a skull or an amulet seen to possess spiritual power to help humans out of various difficulties or to achieve their desires (Majumdar and Madan 1994). The *Barwa* of the Bhil tribe is also believed to magically release the anxiety, worry and the sorrow of people.

Villagers consulting the *Barwa* at times of difficulty or anxiety are given thread, maize corns or a garland. Sometimes the village *Barwa* also makes an animal sacrifice. Every time a goat or *pada* (buffalo) is sacrificed, the head of the sacrificed animal is gifted to the *Barwa* as his share, along with other things such as rice, new clothes and money. Bhil tribesmen believe that if the *Barwa* eats the head of the animal it stimulates his nervous system or makes his sensory organs more active, whereas an ordinary individual does not possess the digestive system to consume this and thus would fall ill.

In the month of *Ashwin* (September-October) Bhil tribesmen celebrate the *Navaratri* festival (nine nights). During this celebration every evening the *Barwa* goes into trance swaying his head round and round. During this state, he makes predictions: "It will rain in the festival of Deewali"; "Flowers will come in gram plants". People take precautions over his pronouncements in advance.

To predict their future winter crops, the *Barwa* looks into the future in a possessed state and watches the *Badi* (small garden). *Barwas* were observed keeping mud in small baskets (nine or eleven in number) made up of bamboo in which he plants paddy or *Jwar*. The *Badi* acts as a magical object. The way the *Badi* grows is considered indicative of the winter crop.

The *Barwa*'s aid is sought to safeguard and increase the food supply. When new plants grow up to the size of ten to twelve inches, in order to protect the crops from evil influences the villagers on the advice of the *Barwa* fix a bamboo or *Sagwan* (teak) pole in the middle of their field. An earthen water pot filled with mango leaves and hay is placed upside-down on this pole; this is physically possible because the leaves are tightly compacted in the pot. Bhil tribesmen hang a garland of mango and *Neem* (*azamelia dirachta*) along with lemon, onion and chillies strung together at the entrance of the house as well as on the main gate of the boundary wall. At the times of crisis, fowls or goats are sacrificed on the advice of the *Barwa* in order to save the crops.

In periods of low rainfall, villagers consult the *Barwa*. After worshipping their gods and goddesses such as *Gao Mata* (the village deity) *Khokha* and *Kassumar Dev* (ancestral gods of Bhil tribe), *Sawan Mata* and *Jalhan Mata* as well as sacrificing animals near the deity, the Bhil *Barwa* and *Tadvi* (village-chief) make a frog of wheat flour. This frog is then placed in a tray full of water and covered with a clay pot. The frog is asked "when will it rain?" as the name of each day of the week is mentioned one by one. It is supposed that rain will come on the day that the flour frog makes a sound of 'tak', made as it breaks down and air bubbles emerge in the water. It is believed the frog acts as a magical object, relieving any individual of the responsibility of prophesying when it will rain as an incorrect verdict might arouse anger. Villagers, however, believe this

ceremony can effectively forecast the weather.

When new crops ripen, Bhil tribesmen celebrate *Jatar* to give thanks to the gods, goddesses and ancestral spirits. Only after *Jatar* celebration, when ritual offerings are prepared for them, villagers eat from the new harvest. Here, too, the *Barwa* plays an important role. Playing a *Damroo* (hourglass drum), he summons the attendance of the gods, goddesses and ancestral spirits. After inhaling the smoke of burning *Dhup* (perfumed sawdust), he starts shaking his body and makes predictions both positive and negative whilst behaving like *Wagja Dev* (Bhil-God). The *Tadvi* (village-chief) makes requests not to the *Barwa* him but to *Wagja Dev* in the form of the *Barwa* to protect the villagers. The villagers in turn promise to celebrate *Salawani*, a celebration in which the *Barwa* also plays an important role. In the "possessed" state the *Barwa* orders *Tadvi* (village-chief) to celebrate more rituals in which he himself plays an important role and takes his share of gifts. After he stops shaking his body, he salutes gods and breaks cucumbers in two halves. He throws them over his head. The cucumbers are believed to act as magical objects. Young men scramble to catch the pieces of cucumber; the ones holding the first half of a cucumber will be blessed with a son as his first child while a girl will be born to the fellows with the bottom half. Many times the *Barwa* encourages general people to make oaths and vows in which he takes a financial share. This is considered necessary both for his survival and to give psychological support to the villagers.

On the day of *Jhapapuj*, one of the major celebrations of *Deewali* (festival of light), the *Barwa* visits every house of the village to worship the ancestral spirits of that family. During worshipping, *bhar* (magic weight) descends upon the *Barwa* and he starts performing, taking the persona of any one of the ancestors of the family. He demands certain edibles, liquor and tobacco. It is not the *Barwa* who eats, drinks or smokes but the ancestral spirits. Therefore, the family members must meet all his demands regardless of whether they have to take monetary loans for this. Many times the action of the *Barwa* cannot be challenged and cannot be tested yet villagers follow him because they generally have full faith in him.

The *Barwa* is also perceived to play an important role in the removal of disease from the village. With the villagers, he celebrates *Salawani*. On this occasion, it was observed that the bottom half of a water pitcher is taken away far from the village boundaries. Containing maize-corns and blood of sacrificed animals, it symbolizes disease. The *Barwa's* assistant then places a few maize-corns (magical objects) at the door of every house of the village, an action that is supposed to have power to ward off ill health.

Illness, it is believed, can be caused by evil spirits and thus the *Barwa* supplies magical objects to act as a defence against these hidden spiritual influences. Moreover, in a depressed state, some Bhil tribes-people think that their human companions are using magic to make them anxious. Those considered more prone to spiritual possession, such as the weak, thin or pregnant for instance, are equipped with devices to provide them with constant protection. The *Barwa* prepares charms, known as *dora* or *tati* and *tabiz* (amulets), which the person is made to wear for long periods or permanently. Evil spirits are driven off by the magical power believed to be present in amulets.

Sometimes the *Barwa* comes with four or five men to help those who are supposed to be suffering from bad luck. He pours liquor in the name of gods, goddesses and ancestors, singing songs through the whole night:

*"Prabhat ni pohra hoya nani bhaidi, Prabhat ni pohra main sadu nani bhaidi."* (Bhili) "The morning is almost nigh little ghost. I will make you dance in the morning, Oye little ghost".

*"Khakhara nal gehra main dhamak wage nani bhaidi, kaki ne bhatija saliya jahu nani bhaidi"* "The sound of drum is coming from the tesu-tree, Oye little ghost. Go away on that tree with your aunty, Oye little ghost".

*"Kala na dariya ma nobat wage nani bhaidi, hapy no ghodi kari lehu nani bhaidi"* "The little ghost will go into the tank of black (dirty) water. The little ghost will fly in the sky riding a snake".

The songs act like magical spells. The *Barwa*, with his men, draw the attention of the ritual attendees pointing out spots such as trees, tanks, the sky, which are accepted haunts of spirits. They request the spirits to take their abode in trees, in a tank or in the sky leaving the sick one. In the morning, the *Barwa* sacrifices a goat, cock and hen and takes parts from the sacrificed animals as well as money and new clothes from the family members.

## VIII. BARWAS AND PROSECUTIONS

The incidence of homicide is high among the Bhil tribesmen. Almost all the killings are intra-communal. They do not necessarily kill with a criminal intent but often out of jealousy, passion, quick and unpredictable temper and to avenge their honour and self-respect (Varma 1978).

Traditionally, the Bhil's belief in sorcery and witchcraft played a role in crime. The *Barwa* in some circumstances chose the victim. His pronouncement determined a woman was a witch, the root cause of ill luck and this was in effect a death sentence. In the event of a man, his wife or child or any of his cattle remaining long in bad health or dying suddenly, the *Barwa* decided if a woman had cast an evil spell. Though it is now rare



after naming her, the victim might be seized and red chilli peppers stuffed into her eyes, flogged or beaten to death. The community did not censure the killing of the witch. On the contrary, the entire community were relieved at her elimination.

During colonial times, this practice was undermined by the Western justice system. Nevertheless, a woman can still today be accused of being connected to undesirable evil influences, which still happens once or twice in a year and remains a serious issue for those concerned with the protection of women and equal rights. These days, however, physical punishment for being a witch is believed to rarely happen in a Bhil village. The *Barwa* knows that by the killing of a woman he has accused of being a witch he cannot escape from the wrath of police, women activists and the media. Publicly at least, he claims that his presence has made their village free from the witches and suggests other remedies for the removal of the sufferings of the villagers.

Another "justice" role played by the *Barwa* is sometimes he mentions the name of an individual and gives orders to beat the fellow with iron chains. Generally, he chooses a person famous for his criminal acts. These incidents are not punished by the police. Police either show ignorance about such incidents or just ignore it in the name of tribal custom. Punishing a notorious person gives psychological satisfaction to villagers.

## IX. CONCLUSION

Though the Bhil tribesmen are poor and not well educated the school system, media and the efforts of government as well as NGOs have brought change to their life. Despite these changes, by using their magical power and herbal knowledge, the Bhil *Barwas* have made a significant contribution to the continuing popularity of shamanism in the society of the Bhil and made themselves indispensable to the life of the villagers, a position they take great effort to maintain. Not only did the *Barwas* undertake shamanic training but also sometimes, they try to continue to keep in touch with the modern world by reading the newspaper and watching television. When they talk about cricket and politics with the people of the younger generation, villagers think their *Barwa* is as knowledgeable as the young men who go to school for studies. A village *Barwa* encourages his village men to work hard because he understands that magic is not the substitute of hard work. When they fall ill, he chants *mantras* (magical spells) and prescribes herbal medicines. He helps them in crises believed to be caused by spiritual forces, black magic or reasons unknown, supplies magical objects and sometimes tries to persuade the villagers to consider a practical solution. His role helps villagers emotionally and gives them mental support. Nevertheless, a *Barwa* also knows how to protect himself from the wrath of the police by making statements that certain practices such as killing a woman accused of being a witch is a thing of the past. Thus, we see that on one hand, he tries his best to protect his traditional role and on the other hand, he opts for practical solution to make his villagers free from any problems. His performance is embedded so deeply in the psyche of the Bhil tribesmen that majority of them could not contemplate living without a *Barwa* in their village. For them the *Barwa* is a person who does more for them than they do for him. It was observed that the Bhils generally have a blind faith in him and do not argue with or question him.

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