

# Echoes of the Forest: Unveiling Socio-cultural Patterns of Baiga Tribe in Chhattisgarh

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## ABSTRACT

Baiga, a tribe well-known historically for its primitive characteristics, untouched and unaltered by the developments of the modern world, has nestled within itself a world full of unique culture, tradition, customs, and vast ecological knowledge of its surroundings. Known for their sense of medications using herbs and plants found in the forests and hence known as the healers, this tribe is also famous for tattooing and shifting agriculture known as 'bewaar'. In contemporary times, Baiga have been recognised as PVTGs, i.e. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, by the Indian government, and efforts have been taken to preserve their identity and ethnicity by safeguarding their rights. This research is an ethnographic study and aims to explore the tribal knowledge, culture, tradition, customs, ceremonies, rituals, idols, and festivals of the Baiga Tribe and the vast ecological knowledge of this tribe. This study was carried out in five villages, namely Polmi, Amera, Agarpani, Pandariya, and Bodla, confined within the Kabirdham district of Chhattisgarh state, India. The tools, such as observation schedules and semi-structured interviews with tribal communities, have been used for this study. Additionally, Interviews, memo writing, diary writing, and FGDs were also used by the researcher to understand the nature of habits and habitat of these communities, schools, and families to identify the Indigenous traditional ecological scientific knowledge, culture, and health-related life practices.

**Keywords:** Tribal knowledge, culture, education, development, inclusivity, heritage

Indigenous communities constitute a vital component of India's socio-cultural mosaic, offering rich, yet often marginalized, perspectives on alternative ways of living, knowing, and relating to the environment. Tribes are known for carrying the ancestral culture, rituals, ceremonies, belief systems, values and other aspects of social and cultural life without much alteration, and this adds to their uniqueness and cultural richness. Tribal groups are a significant site and hold significant importance in exploring the evolving nature of communities from simpler to complex societies. The constitution of India, till 1950, had no proper definition of declaring certain communities as tribes. However, the Lokur committee appointed in 1965 by the government recommended certain criteria like Primitive traits, Distinctive culture, Shyness of contact, Geographical

isolation, and economic and social backwardness to categorise the groups into tribes. India encompasses various tribal groups like Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Hos, Gonds, Kharias, Bhuiyans, Bhumij, Baigas, etc. As per the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, there are more than 700 tribes that are spread over different states and have been identified in Article 342 of the Constitution of India. This research article is based on an ethnographic study of the social and cultural universe of the Baiga tribe. The Baiga community continues to embody a worldview deeply rooted in symbiotic

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coexistence with nature, spiritual cosmology, and ancestral tradition. As per the census of 2011, the population of the Baiga tribe was 89744, and the majority of this tribe is found in the Bilaspur and Kawardha districts of Chhattisgarh. Baiga is one of the most primitive tribes of India, and the largest grouping of the Baigas lives within 250 km of Jabalpur city in Mandla, Dindori, Balaghjat and Seoni districts. The second largest grouping of the Baigas lives in the Bilaspur, Kabirdham, and Surguja districts of Chhattisgarh. The smallest geographical grouping of the Baigas exists in Sidhi, Rewa, Satna, Shahdol, Mirzapur, and Sonebhadra districts of Baghelkhand region, in both MP and Uttar Pradesh (UP).’ (Gangwar, M., and Bose, P. (2013). Recently, the Baiga tribe has been declared as a PVTG, i.e., a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group. As per UNDP (2023), there are 75 PVTGs that have been identified in India based on the recommendations of the Dhabar Commission of 1960-1961. These were declared PVTGs because of their specific development disparities as compared to the other tribal groups. In Chhattisgarh, there are 7 PVTGs that have been identified, Baiga being one of them because of low literacy, shifting cultivation and declining population.

Baiga have some of the unique characteristics which distinguish them from other tribes that occupy space close to them, like the Gonds. They share a symbiotic relationship with nature, and the natural elements are not only resources to be used but sacred entities for them. Baigas practice ‘Bewar’, i.e. shifting agriculture by cutting down the trees in the forests. Baiga do not use ploy on land as they believe the land to be a maternal entity and they cannot scratch the mother. They abandon the used land and shift to the other land for cultivation. This practice, far from being a mere agrarian technique, reflects a profound environmental ethic and spiritual relationship with land and life. The Baigas share an intimate and sustainable relationship with the forests and the wildlife. The Baigas are also astute at finding medicinal herbs, roots, fruits, and other consumable vegetation from the forests, through which their cultural and material needs are met daily (Tribal Research & Training Institute, n.d). Tattooing is one of the major characteristics of this tribe, and different tattoos signify different milestones in the life of the Baiga.

Due to its vast knowledge related to herbs and plants, this tribe is also known as the medicinal tribe. These cultural repertoires, however, are under increasing threat due to assimilationist state policies, forest conservation programs, and the imposition of standardised education models that often disregard indigenous pedagogical frameworks (Sarangapani, 2003). Therefore, there is an urgent need to take measures wherein, first of all, these groups are provided with their basic rights and accepted as a cultural group with attributes and characteristics that make them unique, so that their identities can be safeguarded. “At present, the concept of tribal development seeks to bring the tribals into the mainstream. This ‘mainstream’ has been defined by the dominant capitalist class, and is therefore characterised by the capitalist and socialist value systems of the urban, educated, middle and upper classes of society. They want to exploit natural resources to the maximum in order to make the greatest profits at the quickest possible time” Shilee, 2002. Recently, the Baiga tribe in Chhattisgarh district Gaurela -Pendra- Marwahi has been provided with habitat rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006. Such recognition highlights the need to reframe tribal development discourses away from assimilationist paradigms and toward models that respect cultural specificity, ecological sustainability, and self-determination. This right will help in acknowledging their identity and “to document the traditional rights and mechanisms of the community related to their distinct social systems and culture to provide support in their protection, conservation, and governance”, stated Drolia, Times of India. This has marked important legal and symbolic milestones in acknowledging their traditional ecological stewardship.

The in-depth study of indigenous communities such as Baiga tribe helps in understanding the plurality of cultural values in India and engage with the lived experiences and narratives of marginalisation, identity and resilience. Works of earlier scholars such as Verrier Elwin have unveiled foundational insights into Baiga cosmology, ritual life, and moral codes, highlighting their complex systems of governance, medicine, and religion. More recent studies have shifted toward issues of displacement, development, and environmental degradation (Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011; Baviskar, 2005), which

have pointed towards the need for contemporary ethnographies to capture ongoing transformation in the community. Therefore, this study aims to document and analyse the lived experiences of the Baiga tribe, focusing on the traditions, customs, ceremonies, rituals, and scientific practices, along with capturing the ongoing transitions in Baiga. This research has been carried out in five villages, i.e. Polmi, Amera, Agarpani, Kukdur, and Bodla, confined within the Kawardha district of Chhattisgarh state, India. This study seeks to foreground indigenous voices and contribute to the broader discourse on tribal studies in India.

### Methodology

This research is grounded in a qualitative ethnographic research design and is situated within an interpretivist paradigm that allows for an in-depth and contextualised understanding of the socio-cultural life. The Baiga Tribe, found in various parts of central India, was chosen as a sample for this study. The fieldwork has been carried out in the Kabirdham district, formerly known as Kawardha, in Chhattisgarh. Five villages - Polmi, Amera, Agarpani, Pandariya, and Bodla were selected as the centre of study. Selection criteria included the presence of traditional Baiga households, active cultural practices, and the willingness of community members to participate in the study. Through an anthropological research approach and participatory observations, Interviews, and focus group discussions, the researcher had direct access to the lived experiences and insight into the cultural practices of the Baiga tribe. Anecdotal records, diary writing, photography, and video recording, with permission for tracking the data collection process in the research study, were also done. The data analysis was done qualitatively through thematic, narrative analysis, anecdotal records, as well as archival and document analysis. The themes that have emerged from the study have been discussed below.

### Traditions, customs and festivals

The Baiga community is patriarchal in nature, and sons and daughters carry their paternal lineage names and surnames. Males serve as the head of the family, and all other people follow what he decides. Females mostly stay at home and ferment 'mahua'

for alcohol and other purposes. They go to the field, are engaged in craft making, and prepare food as well. The males on the counterpart go to the forest, collect wood and herbs, and sell them in the market. Also, after marriage, females go to their husband's house and reside there. Village wells are the major sources of water that are used for various purposes like drinking, washing, cooking, and bathing. Wells are a site of interaction among people of the Baiga as well as the Gond community. In the village of Agarpaani in Pandariya, the researcher observed that the Gond Tribe and the Baiga Tribe are residing in the same place. However, the mainland and the entry land are occupied by the people of the Gond Tribe. The main crafts that are made by the tribe are Jharoo, Soop, and Tokri. They do not have any formal training for the above-mentioned craft. They learn it informally at home. The main musical instruments are the mandar and nagara. They know the Hindi language and communicated freely with the research team, except for the females, who seemed a little hesitant initially. The team members tried to interact near the well where the females from both tribes were collecting water and washing dishes (It was the only source of water in the village for both tribes). The field expert also mentioned that the Gond Tribe dominates in most of the villages as they have the resources and can interact with the mainstream society (in offices and colleges). The team observed that both genders were visible together in the market and other places. The field expert mentioned –

*“Yahaan Baiga aur Baigin dono saath me dikhenge aapko, ye log market bhi jaana ho to saath me jaate hain. Inka ye manna nahi hai ki bahar jakar saaman laana sirf purush ka kaam hai”.*

Although the society remains patriarchal in the context of decision-making, the head of the family makes the choice of education, marriages, etc.

**Festivals and Marriages:** The festivals and marriage ceremonies are an amalgamation of the socio-cultural and spiritual nature that represents the vibrant and rich culture of the community. People dress up in their customary Baiga clothing, with jewellery and decorative items. Women wear a saree and men wear a dhoti-shirt. The bridegroom wears a garland of notes (paisa). *Daru* (Mahua/liquor) is an important part of the marriage. It is a symbol that

represents how well a marriage has been planned and organised. 'Mahua' is a sign of happiness, festivity and community unity. It is also linked to the holy belief that it increases the auspiciousness of occasions. Arranged marriages are more prevalent, with factors like social positions and family history as central factors considered while choosing the bride and groom. In many places of the region, females are given the liberty to choose their partners during ceremonies and other gatherings, but the choice was limited to the Baiga community only. While interviewing one of the family members, a man said:

*"One of our daughters-in-law came to our place to celebrate the festival. She liked our son; therefore, she stayed at our place only. Then I went to take permission from her father, got the relation accepted and made them marry".*

Another participant said:

*"If my daughter marries outside the community, I will cut her into pieces and throw her."*

There are rules and boundaries set in the community which are decided and supervised by the males, while females have little choice in the decisions of their lives. Although there are several components which can raise challenges amidst the joy and jubilation. For e.g. Alcohol, if not managed properly, can lead to chaos and unnecessary problems. Additionally, dowry can perpetuate inequalities and financial strain, especially for people who are not financially strong.

Various festivals like Diwali, Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Bhai Dooj, Fagun, and Hariyali are celebrated by the Baiga tribe. On the occasion of Dasara, the females go to other villages to sing and dance. They are welcomed by the males of the village where they are going. They all sing and dance together, and it continues for days (sometimes). It is also an opportunity for youth to interact with each other and get married (as the above section talks about how one female chose her partner for marriage).

### **Clothing and Ornaments**

As is known, traditionally, the Baiga people wear minimal clothes, which was not observed in the present study. The tribe has been exposed to mainstream culture along with industrialisation.

The small businessman from the urban cities come to the villages to sell their goods and articles. The people from the tribe also go to the cities to sell their goods. Along with this, the Christian missionaries, RSS groups, and other NGOs are also contacting the tribal community. This interchange of culture and contact of tribal people with mainstream culture has led to various changes in tribal communities' culture, beliefs, dressing styles, etc. Females wore sarees covering their complete body parts, and males were seen wearing trousers, pyjamas, t-shirts, and shirts. Only the older generation was seen wearing dhotis. Women wore silver bangles, necklaces, and anklets.

### **Belief in 'Bada Deo', 'Ishwar', and 'Shiv'**

The day in a Baiga community starts with the ritual of worshipping the Gods. The tribe traditionally believes in 'Bada deo', who is believed to be the highest deity of the Baiga, along with 'Mara deo', 'Thakur deo', and 'Bhimsen', to name some. In the village, we came to know about the Devtas of Baigas, such as Naga Baiga and Naga Bagin (they used to worship them by using two coconuts that represented 'naga baiga' and 'naga baigin'). They also worshipped Buddha Dev. Some of them believe in 'Shiv' as well. A student mentioned,

*"Ma'am, we worship lord shiva and everyone in our family also worships Him. We visit the temple too".*

There was a temple that was situated in the area with symbols of 'OM' and 'OM NAMAH SHIVAY' carved on the walls. The houses could be seen having symbols of 'SHUBH-LAABH' on the walls. During the field visit, it was found that a very old church had occupied the Baiga land. As it is one of the most primitive and untouched tribes, it becomes of utmost importance to understand the presence of a church in the tribal territory. The traces of this influence can be found in colonial times when Western scholars who became ethnographers visited Indian tribes to study them, influenced the tribe in several ways, religion being one of them, and exposed the communities to Christianity. Also, many NGOs and other organisations that work on the tribal land work not only for the development of the tribes but also to propagate their religious interests. Another factor that could have influenced the tribal people to accept Christianity or Hinduism

could be to seek acceptance in the larger frame of the society, and that made them do what M.N. Srinivas calls 'Sanskritization'. They have adopted the culture and beliefs of the mainstream communities. Many of the samples accepted that they had started following Christianity under the influence of Christian missionaries. The practice of convergence is also practiced overtly or covertly in many areas. The research team interacted with some of the students who were studying in a residential school, and it was found that some of them have now started following Christianity. One of the female students mentioned:

*"Ma'am, we believe in 'Ishwar' (Jesus Christ). There was a didi who believed in him. We liked it, so we also started worshipping 'Ishwar'".*

The word 'Ishwar' can be seen as a metaphor which is used by the community to indicate 'Jesus Christ', who has been introduced to the tribes by outsiders, but which has now become a value of insiders. People who come from different parts of India as government employees, school teachers, businessmen, and so on, also celebrate major Hindu festivals, such as Durga puja, Saraswati puja, Kali puja, Viskarma puja, and even Holi, and some of the local tribal people also participate in them. These religious celebrations or sacred domains have successfully created some space in the psyche of the local tribes, specifically those who are living in urban or semi-urban areas or even on the fringes of urban villages (Kumari, 2014; Chakraborty, 2018; Ramanujam & Dhanyamol, 2018; Rimayi, 2019). It is important to note that when people enter the tribal areas with their predispositions, in the name of the development and upliftment of tribals, they tend to dilute tribal culture, belief system, and social configuration in the name of mainstreaming. Their culture needs to be preserved and protected from dilution. This was one of the worries of Elwin as he wanted these tribal areas to be preserved and protected from the more advanced sections of society, as he believed that their art, dance, folk culture, etc., would be exploited by traders and other people. The Gonds are in touch with the mainstream population, which is also the reason they are influenced by their culture. Hence can influence the Baiga people as well. Although these families were also following the Baiga culture

at their houses. Therefore, their religion is in a transition phase where the people are following their own culture as well as the culture they interact with.

### **'Mahua', an integral part of the Baiga Universe**

Consumption of alcohol in many societies is considered to be profane and a threat to social integration. But in many societies, alcohol is seen as an integral part of their social and cultural universe. It serves as a ritual and social artefact as found in the sample of this study. It was observed that consumption of alcohol is not attributed to any gender, occasion or a particular hour of the day. During the field visit, it was seen that most of the people, including males and females, were drunk. Females prepare Mahua by fermenting the flowers of the Mahua tree, and it is used by all the people to uplift their sensory gratification. There are various debates on the extent to which consuming alcohol in the tribal community should be taken seriously. Also, in most of the Durkheimian fashion analysis, the function of drinking is seen as the maintenance of social cohesion and conviviality. As stated by Robin Room, "Anthropologists not so much in their formal papers, but more as the discussions turned to policy implications tended to downgrade the severity of the problems; some were inclined to discount assertions that alcohol problems were a serious issue as merely reflecting the prejudices of missionaries and women's groups". Recently, while attending a course on ethnography, there were anthropologists who believed that alcohol is a part of tribal culture; therefore, the underdevelopment of their culture should not be attributed to the consumption of alcohol. But alcohol raises various problems within the community, from unproductively, violence, and abuse to serious health concerns. Some of the students in Balak Chattravas, Polmi, reported that all the domestic violence happens only after the drinking of the *Mahua* (liquor). It was informed by some of the participants that there are many cases in society where the males had become so addicted to alcohol that their wives left them and took the kids along with them. Some of them also marry other men. Additionally, this is what is being passed from one generation to another. The students enrolled in EMRS are a part of the same social setting, and

they do not see alcohol as a problematic substance. Some of them had also started consuming alcohol. Therefore, while developing policies and reports, it is important to create conscious awareness among the community on the repercussions of alcohol for the community as a whole and the future generation.

### **The art of Tattooing**

The history of tattooing goes back to the advent of colours and sharp needles during the Neolithic Age. If certain marks on the skin of the Iceman, a mummified human body dating from about 3300 BC, are tattoos, then they represent the earliest known evidence of the practice. Tattoos have also been found on Egyptian and Nubian mummies dating from about 2000 BC.' Gautam (2011). Tattoos have cultural, social, and economic significance for many societies. They represent status, belief systems, healthcare practice, community markers, symbols of love, forms of punishment, and stages in a person's life. Similarly, tattooing functions not merely as body art but as a culturally encoded rite of passage, marking transitions in gender, age, and social identity. The Baiga tribe is very fond of tattooing. It starts at an early stage of life, and almost all the parts of the body are tattooed. As informed by the participants, tattoos start from the forehead and gradually extend to other parts of the body. They have similar styles and patterns for everyone. This tribe also believes that tattoos help them prevent certain medical conditions as well. As stated by Kumar and Thakur (2022), "the tattooing of the image of a cobra by a Baiga lady on the face below the mouth helps protect them from the effects of eating any poisonous thing." As reported by a girl of 'Adivasi Kanya Ashram', Amera, which was a hostel run by Adam Tati Kalyan Vibhag, the tattoo of the Baiga tribe was made on their forehead at the age of 7, but most of them refused to have the tattoo. only a few girls had tattoos on their foreheads. It is also a sign of modernisation.

### **The Healers**

P. Sarangpani (2003) mentioned the Baiga Tribe and their medicinal practices, and their specialised knowledge about biodiversity, medicinal plants, and ecology as related to indigenous knowledge. Along with this, Burger, in Aikman (1999, also states

that "This description of the specialised knowledge of the Baigas conforms well with references to 'indigenous knowledges' in international discourse. Most of these are references to non-western, oral knowledge about biodiversity and medicinal plants and ecology, of autochthonous groups who have become marginalised and dispossessed, typically as a consequence of colonisation". The Baiga claim that they can treat TB, Mirgi, and many other diseases using their medicines, which they get from the forest. They do not store the medicines at home; instead, when needed, they go and search for these medicines in the Jungle. One of the baiga claimed that these medicines would stop working if it is known to many others. There was no formal book for the reference of the disease and its treatment. Also, there were no books for the identification of medicinal plants. If somebody wants to become the Vaidya then they need to go to the superior Vaidya and take the training for a certain period of time (generally 9 months in 3 slots). It was mandatory to complete this period of training to be titled 'Vaidya'. The educated Baigas also believed in the ghost. According to them, many of the diseases are caused by the ghost-like vomiting, body swelling, chakkar, etc. As P. Sarangpani (2003) states, 'Included in the knowledge is a wide range of herbal and root preparations, and also divine beings, both godlike and evil, that cause illness and who need to be propitiated'. Therefore, they display a strong belief in the entities beyond the reach of the physical world who are responsible for both good and bad events in the Baiga world.

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### **CONCLUSION**

This ethnographic research uncovered distinctive aspects of Baiga's socio-cultural life in the Kabirdham district of Chhattisgarh. The Baiga community in this region has faced historical displacement due to forest conservation policies and state-led development initiatives, often resulting in cultural disintegration and socio-economic marginalisation

(Sharma, 2013). Even after this, this community has continued to protect and echo its cultural and traditional values in many ways. There were many customs and traditions that were still followed by the inhabitants of the land. Although through interviews and FDGs, it was found that it was limited to the older generation of inhabitants who still believed in continuing and preserving their historical identity and cultural life. There was a deep intertwining of the baiga culture with the other cultures. The novel generation had much liberation of ideas and choices of which rituals they want to continue in their life and which to exclude, as found in the case of hostel girls, where only a few girls carried the ancestral tradition of tattoos, which is believed to be very significant in the Baiga universe. These girls chose not to get themselves tattooed, which represents more autonomy in the newer generation. The healing practices could be traced only in a few of the older generations. The intricate interplay of various developments, like the setting up of a market in the village, EMRS schools, hostels for girls, and cultural exchange between children, have given them opportunities to choose for themselves. This interplay could be seen in the form of clothing, work opportunities, choices of getting tattooed, use of alcohol in educated Baigas, and religious beliefs. Even after these developments, the baiga carry on their customs and traditions and preserve their culture while simultaneously witnessing the preservation of the colonial culture in the form of the church. Also, the stakeholders in the name of development believe in merging these tribes with the dominant culture by calling their culture and customs backwards. There has been no substantial research or policy that works on developing the Baiga community while simultaneously building grounds for preservation of their cultural, scientific, and ecological knowledge. For the attainment of sustainable development goals, it is important to hear and understand the voices of the people of the Baiga community so that development can follow based on their requirements. It becomes important, therefore, that policies and initiatives are taken considering the demands and requirements of the Baiga people while taking development initiatives, simultaneously preserving their rich culture and values.

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