



TRADITIONAL OBSERVANCE AND POST-DISPLACEMENT TRANSFORMATION OF FESTIVALS AMONG THE MAHADEV KOLI TRIBE OF PUNE DISTRICT

PRASHANT POTE¹ AND ANJALI KURANE²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.

E-mail: Prashantpote712@gmail.com

²Emeritus Professor, Institute: Department of Anthropology, Savitribai Phule Pune University,

Pune. E-mail: Anjalikurane25@gmail.com

Abstract: Development-induced displacement has been a defining feature of India's post-independence development agenda, particularly through large-scale dam projects that have disproportionately affected indigenous and tribal communities. This study examines the socio-cultural consequences of displacement resulting from the Dimbhe Dam project on the Mahadev Koli community of Ambegaon Taluka in Pune District, Maharashtra. The Mahadev Kolis, a Scheduled Tribe traditionally inhabiting the Western Ghats, experienced displacement in multiple phases between 1966 and 2002 due to the progressive submergence of their villages under the dam reservoir.

The study focuses on the impact of displacement on social cohesion and ritual life, using traditional festivals as critical indicators of collective organization and cultural continuity. A qualitative research design was adopted, employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select displaced Mahadev Koli elders aged between 45 and 85 years from ten affected villages. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, focused group discussions, and structured interviews, supplemented by audio recordings and photographic documentation to capture oral histories, ritual practices, and material expressions of culture.

The research documents transformations in the observance of five major festivals—Saath, Dev Pardhi, Beej, Shimgha,

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and Bohada—by comparing pre-displacement collective practices with post-displacement patterns. Findings reveal a marked breakdown of village-level ritual organization following displacement. Festivals that previously reinforced communal labour, resource sharing, and social regulation have increasingly shifted toward fragmented, household-level observances. Saath and Dev Pardhi illustrate declining collective participation, while the Beej festival reflects a loss of ritual knowledge and ecological symbolism. Shingha has been reduced from a multi-day structured ritual to a single-day event, indicating erosion of symbolic complexity and social norms. The complete discontinuation of the Bohada festival after 2005 represents the most severe cultural rupture, driven by social marginalization and ridicule in mixed-religion resettlement environments.

Overall, the study demonstrates that development-induced displacement has resulted in forced acculturation, weakening of social cohesion, and erosion of ritual life among the Mahadev Koli community, leading to long-term cultural and spiritual disintegration.

Keywords: Development-induced displacement; Mahadev Koli; Tribal festivals; Ritual transformation

Introduction

Large dams have occupied a central position in India's development discourse, symbolizing progress, modernization, and state-led economic growth. However, alongside their projected benefits of irrigation, drinking water supply, and hydroelectric power generation, dams have also produced extensive social and cultural costs. Among the most critical of these is development-induced displacement, which has disproportionately affected indigenous and tribal communities across the country. For such communities, displacement is not merely a matter of physical relocation but entails profound disruptions to their social organization, cultural practices, and collective identity.

The forced physical and social remotion of individuals or entire communities obligated by large scale economic project is known as development induced displacement which is characterized by compulsory desertion of ancestral lands and habitats, often resulting on profound detachment from the socio-economic and cultural geographies that define the displaced population

(Challa, 2013) . Since the colonial period, development induced displacement has been a constant component of India's landscape, where institutional data admit that even in major projects like Bhakra Nangal dam, resettlement efforts have been historically slow and incomplete (Challa, 2013). While Development-Induced Displacement (DID) in India spans multiple sectors, river valley projects, specifically large and medium dams, constitute the single largest cause of uprootment. Between 1951 and 1990, an estimated 16.4 million people were displaced by dam construction, accounting for the vast majority of all development-related displacement (2024, Bikash Chandra Dash). Since independence, India's dam network has grown to over 3,600, with another 700 on the way. While these projects represent progress, they disproportionately affect tribal populations. In fact, tribal people make up 40% to 50% of all those displaced by development across the country, for instance, in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, the construction of the Tultuli dam on the Khobragadi River resulted in the relocation of 13,600 residents. Tribal people were the most affected group, making up more than 51% of the total displaced population (*Study on Development Projects, Displaced Tribals & Their Living Conditions*, n.d.). Similarly, the case of the 1972 Pavana Dam in Maharashtra illustrates the challenges of rehabilitation. While the project displaced 1,100 people, records show that only 300 of them successfully received benefits, leaving the majority without proper compensation (Kaur et al., 2024). Research from the Indian Social Institute shows that development projects have displaced 21.3 million people, with 16.4 million of those losses caused by dam construction alone. Since 1947, India has built 3,300 dams, and another 1,000 are currently being built. On average, a single large dam forces over 44,000 people to leave their homes. The most severely affected are tribal groups and scheduled castes, who often lose their land, jobs, and community ties, leading to deep poverty (*Study on Development Projects, Displaced Tribals & Their Living Conditions*, n.d.).

A study by Cernea, shows that forced displacement is the major reason that demolish arrangements of social organization and interpersonal ties. Development induced displacement projects which includes dam construction, road or highway construction, mining etc. are reason that is causing the forced displacement of communities from one place to another. This forced displacement is the reason behind the declination of cultural as well as social identity of ethnic minorities (Rashmi, 2021). Beyond the physical move, the biggest challenge for tribal communities is losing access to the forests and

resources they rely on for survival. This loss leads to poverty and a sense of powerlessness in unfamiliar environments. Resettlement programs often ignore their cultural identity and spiritual ties to the land, shattering their traditional way of life including their religious practices, communal bonds, and forest-based livelihoods (Joseph, n.d.)

While a tribe is typically identified by its shared culture, language, and kinship, such broad definitions often fail to capture the diversity of tribal life. In the Indian context, the term “Scheduled Tribe” carries a specific legal meaning under Article 342. It refers only to those communities that the President has formally identified and declared as Scheduled Tribes, ensuring they are recognized by the state for constitutional protections (Mishra & Vashisht, 2022). The official recognition of Koli Mahadev tribe as Scheduled tribe affirmed under The constitution (Scheduled Tribe) order, 1950 (OI, n.d.). The Mahadev Kolis represent one of the primary hill tribes of Western Maharashtra, predominantly inhabiting the Sahyadri ranges within the Western Ghats. Their traditional territory spans five key districts: Pune, Nashik, Ahmednagar, Thane, and Raigad, where they occupy both the river valleys and the rugged mountain slopes. They are recognized as a relatively progressive community among the Scheduled Tribes, often characterized by a higher degree of socio-economic integration compared to other tribal groups (Kurane, 2002).

Pune is the second-largest district in Maharashtra by landmass, covering 15,642 sq. km. (approximately 5.08% of the state’s total area). Geographically, it is located in western Maharashtra, positioned between 17°54’ to 19°24’ N latitude and 73°29’ to 75°10’ E longitude. The district shares its borders with Ahmadnagar to the north and east, Solapur and Satara to the south/southeast, and Thane and Raigarh to the west/northwest. Administratively, Pune is organized into 14 talukas, including Ambegaon, where this research was conducted (Aquifer maps And ground water management plan, Ambegaon, Baramati, Indapur, Jannar and Purandar blocks, Pune district, Maharashtra.) .

The present study focuses on Mahadev kolis of Ambegaon, Pune District which comes under PESA regulations and classified as a Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) area and changes that happened in festival celebrations due to displacement happened because of the Dimbhe dam project (Development induced displacement). The PESA Act of 1996 was created to give tribal communities the power to govern themselves and protect their traditional way of life. Under this law, state Governors have special authority to safeguard tribal interests.

They can stop tribal land from being sold to outsiders, control local money-lending, and even change or cancel national or state laws if they do not suit the needs of the tribal area (Philip, 2024). The Mahadev Koli community lives in harmony with nature by using resources wisely. They protect “sacred groves,” which are small forest areas kept untouched to save plants and animals. They also harvest honey, fruit, and herbs carefully so the forest can regrow. To protect their land, they build simple dams and soil walls that stop erosion and help rainwater soak into the ground (Pawase Vishal Bhausheb & Ganjave Prashant Tukaram, 2024)

The Dimbhe Dam is a critical component of the Kukadi Irrigation Project, a large-scale composite hydraulic initiative comprising five major reservoirs: Dimbhe, Manikdoh, Wadaj, Yedgaon, and Pimpalgaon Joge. Geographically situated on the Ghod River, a primary tributary of the Bhima River where the project received its initial administrative sanction in 1966 (*ESDD Report Dimbhe Dam.Pdf*, n.d.)

Development-induced displacement, particularly due to large infrastructure projects such as dams, has been widely recognized as a major factor contributing to socio-cultural transformation among indigenous communities. Displacement disrupts traditional livelihoods, settlement patterns, and social organization, often bringing displaced families into closer contact with urban and dominant cultural systems (Rashmi, 2021). Such changes frequently affect religious beliefs and ritual practices. Among the Mahadeo Koli of Maharashtra, studies have documented a gradual shift from the worship of non-anthropomorphic nature deities toward anthropomorphic Hindu gods such as Shiva, Hanuman, and Ganapati, indicating processes of cultural assimilation and Sanskritization (Kurane, 2002). Sanskritization, as defined by M.N. Srinivas, is a process of social mobility where marginalized groups adopt the dietary habits, religious rituals, and belief systems of dominant castes specifically the Brahmins to negotiate a higher status within the social hierarchy. Despite traditional prohibitions, this cultural imitation allows communities to gradually reposition themselves in the caste structure over several generations (M.N. Srinivas, 1952). According to Purkayastha (2015), the Oraon of Chotanagpur practiced an agriculturally rooted faith, where rituals were intrinsically linked to the farming cycle. However, current observations in the Barak Valley indicate a significant cultural shift. While some ancestral ceremonies such as Khut, Karam, and Hariari Puja persist in a limited capacity,

there is a visible decline in the community's familiarity with traditional spirits. This has led to the adoption of local Hindu festivals, such as Durga Puja and Kali Puja, which have increasingly superseded traditional tribal observances in both participation and communal interest.

Research Methodology

Study Area and Research Design

The study was carried out in Ambegaon Taluka of Pune District, Maharashtra, an area significantly affected by development-induced displacement. The research focused on displaced Mahadev Koli households originally residing in Ambegaon. A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design was adopted to understand changes in ritual practices and social cohesion in the post-displacement context. The study is exploratory and interpretive in nature, grounded in developmental anthropology.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used in the initial phase to identify key cultural informants, including community elders, ritual specialists, and traditional leaders. These individuals possessed first-hand experiential knowledge of the displacement phases between 1966 and 2002. Their narratives provided culturally embedded accounts of pre-displacement festival practices and community organization.

Snowball sampling was subsequently used to locate additional participants across geographically dispersed resettlement sites. This method was particularly effective in accessing a fragmented population living within mixed-caste and mixed-religion settlements. Community networks facilitated trust-building and enabled the collection of oral histories from respondents with ancestral and ritual ties to Ambegaon. In total, the sample included individuals who had either directly experienced displacement or inherited cultural knowledge through intergenerational transmission.

Data Collection Tools and Techniques

Primary data were collected using qualitative ethnographic methods. A structured interview schedule was administered to record the socio-demographic details of the respondents. An interview guide was used to

conduct in-depth interviews focusing on ritual change, festival observance, and transformations in social relations after displacement.

Participant narratives were supplemented with audio recordings and photographic documentation to capture material culture, ritual spaces, and symbolic elements of festivals. These visual and oral records supported thick description and contextual interpretation of cultural practices. Ethical considerations were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. The research process was conducted with cultural sensitivity, adhering to the anthropological principle of beneficence.

Data Analysis methods

Qualitative data were analysed using manual thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns, symbols, and meanings related to ritual transformation, social cohesion, and displacement. Codes were generated inductively and grouped into broader themes such as ritual continuity, ritual fragmentation, spatial dislocation, and cultural adaptation. Interpretations were informed by emic perspectives and supported by relevant anthropological literature.

Quantitative data derived from the structured interview schedule were analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to examine demographic variables and patterns of festival observance across households. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings enabled a comprehensive understanding of the cultural consequences of displacement.

Aim of the Study

The present study aims to examine the impact of displacement on social cohesion and ritual practices of the Mahadev Koli community, with particular reference to changes in traditional festival observance and post-displacement transformation following their relocation from Ambegaon in Pune District.

Objectives of the Study

- To document the traditional practices associated with the *Saath*, *Dev Pardhi*, *Beej*, *Shimgha*, and *Bohada* festivals as expressions of collective identity and social cohesion among the Mahadev Koli community.

- To examine the shift from collective village-level festival celebrations to fragmented household-based observances in the post-displacement context.

Data Interpretation

The demographic profile of the respondents consists of Mahadev Koli elders residing in the Ambegaon Taluka of Pune District, Maharashtra, purposively selected within an age bracket of 45 to 85 years to ensure the retrieval of ritual memory. The cohort is characterized by a high degree of socio-economic homogeneity; participants primarily possess a background in agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, with formal educational attainment generally limited to illiteracy or primary-level schooling (up to the 4th standard). Given the study's focus on documenting disappearing oral traditions, the sampling specifically targeted these senior members as the primary custodians of ancestral knowledge.

The demographic profile for this study covers ten villages in Maharashtra's Ambegaon taluka. A total of 23 respondents participated, providing a gender-inclusive perspective (18 male, 5 female). Given the study's focus on cultural memory and long-term impact, all participants were aged 50 and above. While the predominant livelihoods among the group were farming and household management, the sample also included perspectives from the public and private sectors. Data was rigorously collected through six individual in-depth interviews and four focused group discussions.

Data states that, the displacement process was not a single event but a gradual transition that spanned from 1966 to 2002. This relocation occurred in three distinct phases, primarily driven by the rising water levels of the dam. The first phase involved the movement of Ambegaon, Koltavde, Phulwade to Kalamb and Vachape. The second phase was strategically planned to relocate the remaining villages that were at risk as the water was expected to rise further. Once the water levels increased as predicted, these communities were moved. One year later, a final rise in the water levels triggered the third and last phase of displacement, resulting in the relocation of the final remaining villages.

The data indicates that the community regards this region as their ancestral homeland. This land is deeply connected to their cultural identity and traditional way of life. Their spiritual practices are characterized by the worship of non-human (non-anthropomorphic) deities, representing a strong bond with the natural environment.

Displacement triggers an immediate socio-cultural rupture, forcing tribal communities into a state of profound alienation and deculturation. To mitigate social exclusion and economic precarity, these individuals are often compelled to undergo forced acculturation, discarding traditional dialects and customs in favour of the host community's norms as a survival mechanism. Acculturation is a process of change that happens when people move into a new environment and start adopting the local customs, habits, and ways of life of the people around them (George, n.d.). This vulnerability is further exacerbated by a systemic information asymmetry; a lack of legal literacy prevents the displaced from securing equitable compensation, often resulting in reverse migration to original homelands. The sense of regret expressed by the community is not only linked to the loss of economic resources but is most visible in the gradual erosion of their social and ritual life.

Traditional Observance and Post-Displacement Transformation

The Saath Festival: The Saath festival is an important tradition that marks the beginning of the farming season. It is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first rain in June. Traditionally, all the villagers would gather at the temple or site of the village goddess (Devi). The Bhagat (the community leader) would ask the villagers to bring items for the ritual, such as turmeric, vermilion, camphor, and stone oil lamps. As part of the celebration, the villagers would work together to prepare a special food called Puran Poli. This food and the other items were offered to the goddess to ask for a good rainy season. If the rains were successful and the crops grew well, the villagers would show their thanks by offering part of the harvest to the deity before taking the rest to their homes.

Before the community was displaced, Ambegaon was the main centre for this festival. At that time, the celebration was a community event that brought everyone together. However, after the families were displaced, the way they celebrate has changed. Instead of gathering as a whole village, individual families now perform the rituals on their own. This shift from a community celebration to a private one shows that the sense of unity and togetherness among the villagers has decreased because of their displacement.

Festival and the Impact of Displacement

The Dev Pardhi: The Dev Pardhi festival is another significant tradition celebrated from the last week of December until mid-January. During this time,

it was mandatory for the elders of the house or family members who enjoy hunting to come to the Ambegaon village. The Bhagat directs these members to go hunting to bring back a symbolic offering. Although various animals were hunted in the past, the community now adjusts these practices because hunting is legally banned. Before the hunt begins, a small piece of chicken is wrapped in a wild banana leaf and buried in the earth as an offering to God. The villagers then hunt on the first day but stop their activity for a period in between, as they believe the deity is hunting during that time. They return with their prey on the final day of the festival.

A key part of this tradition involves predicting the future of the environment. On the last day, the villagers unwrap the meat that was buried at the start of the festival. If the meat has stayed fresh inside the banana leaf, it is seen as a sign that there will be good rains that year. However, if the meat has spoiled, it is believed the rains will be poor. In the past, all prey brought back by the hunters was distributed among all the villagers, which reinforced a sense of sharing and community.

Since the displacement, however, the way this festival is celebrated has changed from a community level to an individual level. While some family members still go hunting and follow the traditional rituals, they no longer share the meat with the rest of the village. Each household now keeps what they bring back for themselves. This shift from collective sharing to individual benefit shows that the harmony and unity that once held the village together have weakened significantly after displacement.

Gratitude and Environmental Worship

The Beej Festival: Following the Dev Pardhi festival, the community celebrates a festival known as Beej in January. This festival is dedicated to the worship of natural elements, including the sun, water, mountains, and forests. On the day of the festival, villagers wake up early in the morning to prepare prasad (sacred food), which is then offered to these various nature gods. The primary purpose of this ritual is to express gratitude to the natural world. The community believes that life continues only because of the blessings and resources provided by these natural deities.

The observance of Beej has changed significantly over time, reflecting a shift in community values. In the past, the festival was a major event where every person in the village would take a leave from their work to participate.

It was a time of collective focus on nature and spirituality. However, in the present day, the importance of the festival has faded. Many people are no longer aware of when the festival begins or ends, showing a loss of traditional knowledge and a decline in the communal celebration of nature.

Ritual Practice and Social Rules

The Shimgha (Holi) Festival: Shimgha, also known as Holi, is considered the most important festival of the community and traditionally lasts for five days. The first day, known as Choti Holi, begins with a symbolic ritual where a small branch from a fig tree is buried in a hole along with rice, turmeric, and vermilion. This site is then lit by a young boy between the ages of 10 and 15. On the second day, the village children divide into two groups: one group collects wood from every household, while the second group joins the Bhagat and musicians to visit the original fig tree. After offering a mixture of rice and curd, the tree is cut and brought to the site of Choti Holi. It is placed in a hole containing coins and ritual offerings, followed by the offering of Puran Poli, coconuts, and sugar garlands. The wood collected from the village is then stacked around the tree.

The lighting of the Holi fire was historically a coordinated regional event. In the past, Ambegaon would light a fire approximately 40 feet high; only after seeing this fire would neighbouring villages begin their own rituals. A specific person, such as a village elder or a newly married couple, is chosen in advance to light the fire. Once lit, participants walk around the fire five times in an anti-clockwise direction while pouring water, followed by an evening of folk songs and dancing. A unique social rule is enforced during the night: all men must sleep at the site of the fire. Any man who returns home to sleep is required to pay a penalty, such as money, rice, or a chicken. On the third morning, the women throw water mixed with the cool ashes on the sleeping men, and the community spends the day celebrating together.

But the transition reflects a significant loss of cultural depth following displacement. Traditionally, the fourth and fifth days were reserved for playing with colours, but this was only the conclusion of a long, complex spiritual process. Currently, the resettled community has largely abandoned the first three days of the ritual. Many families no longer participate in the village-level ceremonies or the traditional tree-worshiping practices. Instead, the displaced family has started focusing only on a single day of playing with colors. This

change highlights how displacement has disconnected the community from their traditional ritual calendar and collective identity.

Bohada: Bohada is far more than a simple celebration; it serves as a vital expression of the Mahadev Koli tribe's cultural identity and their profound spiritual bond with the natural world. Maintaining the traditions of Bohada is essential for the survival of this heritage, which forms a significant part of the Indian Knowledge System. This festival provides important insights into community unity, cultural strength, and a sustainable way of living in harmony with nature (Pawase Vishal Bhausahab & Ganjave Prashant Tukaram, 2024). Following the Holi celebrations, the community traditionally observed Bohada. This festival involved villagers wearing a variety of masks and performing traditional dances and dramas. A central feature of this ritual was the occurrence of trance states among participants, which was viewed as a symbolic moment where a deity temporarily entered the human body.

However, the transition to a resettled environment brought significant social challenges that led to the decline of this tradition. The community was relocated to an area with a mixed-religion population. When the displaced villagers attempted to celebrate Bohada, members of other communities mocked them for wearing animal masks. This external ridicule caused the villagers to feel degraded and ashamed of their customs. As a direct result of this social pressure and the lack of cultural understanding from their new neighbours, the celebration of Bohada was completely discontinued around the year 2005.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the displacement of the Mahadev Koli community between 1966 and 2002 was not a single event but a multi-stage transition that fundamentally broke their cultural and spiritual framework. While the community remains deeply attached to their ancestral land, the move to a mixed-religion resettlement area has caused a significant socio-cultural rupture. This transition has forced a shift from collective, village-wide rituals to fragmented, private observances within individual households.

The documentation of festivals like Saath, Dev Pardhi, Beej, Shimgha, and Bohada highlights a consistent pattern of ritual loss. For instance, the Saath and Dev Pardhi festivals once reinforced community unity through shared labor and the collective distribution of food, but these have now become individualized

practices that lack the original sense of village harmony. Similarly, the Beej festival's decline reveals a fading of traditional knowledge and environmental gratitude. The Shimgha festival, which was once a complex five-day spiritual process involving the entire region, has been simplified into a single day of playing with colors, stripping the ritual of its symbolic depth and social rules.

The most critical evidence of cultural erosion is the complete discontinuation of the Bohada festival in 2005. This loss was directly caused by social ridicule and pressure from the host community in the mixed-religion environment, which made the displaced villagers feel ashamed of their traditional masks and trance states. Ultimately, the study shows that displacement leads to forced acculturation, where the community discards its traditional identity as a survival mechanism. This process results in the visible erosion of social cohesion and the permanent loss of the community's unique spiritual bond with the natural world.

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