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Cultural Identity And Societal Structure Of The Girasia Tribe In Southern Aravalli Region

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Abstract:

This study delves into the historical origins, social hierarchy, cultural traditions, and modern transformations of the Girasia tribe, predominantly residing in the southern Aravalli region of Rajasthan. With a lineage tracing back to a fusion of Rajput and Bhil ancestries, the Girasia community has preserved distinctive cultural practices, including clan-based social structures, traditional panchayat systems, animistic religious beliefs, unique art forms, and symbolic tattooing. The research further examines the tribe's adaptation to contemporary influences such as the Panchayati Raj system, educational advancements, and the gradual erosion of caste-based distinctions. Employing a multidisciplinary approach encompassing history, anthropology, and sociology, this paper highlights the resilience of the Girasia tribe in maintaining their cultural identity amidst evolving socio-political landscapes.

Keywords: Animism, Art and Craft, Clan System, Girasia Tribe, Indigenous Governance, Panchayat System, Rajput-Bhil Ancestry, Rajasthan Tribes, Tattooing, Tribal Culture, Tribal Identity

The Southern Aravalli region has a unique location where the Girasias are inhabited. This region is bordered by Mewar and Marwar in the north and northwest, respectively. "There is a close relationship between the landscape pattern and the distribution of the tribal population. The forested hills, valleys provide a natural habitat for the majority of tribals. They have their distinct problems and thus require plans and policies that are different from general schemes. It is, therefore, essential that demographic characteristics of the tribal people living in a region are analyzed to give a proper shape and dimension to the welfare projects devised for the socio-economic upliftment of these people and their habitat"[1].

ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL INCIDENCE:

The origin of the Girasia has been a matter of conjecture by historians on Rajasthan history. Rajasthan history is the cumulative account of the struggle between fendal clans and the early tribes settled in this part of our country. The origin place of Girasia is Abu or Arbuda. At the time of Parmars, it included Sirohi state, some part of Jodhpur, Danta and Palanpur States. Chandrawati was the capital of Abu. The region Arbuda is called Ashtadasa-satades.

[1] G.N.Singh and R.P.Sharma (1992) "Demographic structure of scheduled tribe population: A case study of Munger district, Bihar, Socio-cultural environment", edited by G.P.Gupta, page 183.

"The origin of Girasia tribe is the result of the Rajputs taking shelter in the Aravalli hills, consequent to the spread of Buddhism. They seemed to have mingled with the Bhils living in the Aravalli ranges. They are known as Bhil Gary (Girasia) in the Western Aravalli and the district where they are inhabited is called Nagar"[2].

Bajranglal Lohia narrates that "according to tradition, Kanhad Dev Chauhan of Jalore, being defeated by the Muslims in 1388 AD fled to the hills. There he defeated the Bhils and became their ruler and his son, who was declared to be a Rao of Merpur, settled there. The Rajputs of relatively pure race of the plains began to consider them low in status in their society and ceased marrying with them. They mixed up with the Bhils and a new tribe, a mixture of Rajputs and Bhils was thus borne"[3].

Allied to the Bhils, but ranking just above them in the social scale are the Girasia, the principal inhabitants of the Bhakar and also numerous in the Santpur and Pindwara areas.

"According to Sir John Malcolm, the term "GIRASIA" denotes "Chief who were driven from their positions by invaders and established and maintained a clan to share of the revenue upon the ground of their power to disturb of prevent its collection"[4].

. The Girasias are said to have come from former Mewar state , many centuries ago and as they still have their internal gods or circles of affinity (such as Parmar, Chauhan, Rathore etc) upon the model of a regular clan, it may perhaps be taken that they are the descendants of Rajputs by Bhil women.

"According to the folklore , Girasias are descendent from the Chauhan Rajput of Jalore district nearly six centuries ago after a defeat in a battle, they fled in hills where they remained to protect themselves and mingled their blood with local people i.e. Bhils"[5].

"Col. Todd came in contact with some Girasia Chieftain of Mewar and wrote that a Girasia Chieftain was only one who had land (grass) by grant (patta) of the Prince for which he performed service with specified quotes at home and Abu road renewable at every lapse"[6].

Thus, a Girasia Jagirdar had perspective rights on land. He considered Girasia to be deprived from 'grass' meaning subsistence. Many scholars have used different spellings and have pronounced it differently such as 'Girasia', 'Garasia', 'Girasiya', 'Girrasia', 'Girresseya' and 'Grasya' for the Girasias. The correct spelling of 'Girasia' can be determined by the dialect used by this tribe.

"The word is derived from the Sanskrit GIRAS which signifies a mouthful and has been metaphorically applied to designate the small share of the produce of a country which these plunderers clan"[7]. Another interpretation is that the name Girasia is derived from the Sanskrit word Giri (mountain) and Ashrit (depending) because they reside in mountains.

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[2] Kavi Shyamal Das "Veer Vinod", Part I, Page 194.

[3] Bajranglal Lohia (1954), "Rajasthan ki Jatiyan", Calcutta, page 48.

[4] B.N Dhoundiyal (1967) "Rajasthan District Gazetteer, Sirohi", Directorate of District Gazetteer Govt. of Rajasthan, Govt. Central Press, Jaipur, Page 102.

[5] R.Singh (1999) "Naturalistic vision of tribal art", Anmol publication Ltd., New Delhi, edition, page 96.

[6] Col James Todd "Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, Volume I", Page 190-191.

[7] B.N Dhoundiyal. (1967) " Rajasthan District Gazetteer, Sirohi", Directorate of District Gazetteer Govt. of Rajasthan, Govt. Central Press, Jaipur, Page 96.

GIRASIA- NON GIRASIA RELATIONSHIP:

"Apart from borrowing from non tribals, the tribal communities also imitate the local non-tribal communities in their relations with other tribes. Different communities living in the same region generally practice similar customs and tradition"[8].

Girasia are an ancient most tribe of Rajasthan and are supposed be an off shoots of Bhil tribe with whom, their culture has more common similarity. The Girasia community in the sense that at social level, the tribe is divided into many distinct groups such as Girasia, Bhil Girasia and Dungri Girasia. Again Girasia community is divided into moti jyat (higher caste) and nanki jyat (lower caste) on the basis of blood relationship.

Amongst the Girasia, some consider themselves to be higher than others. Parmar, Thaiwar, Chawhan and Solanki are considered higher amongst the Girasia. All the Girasia consider Bhils, Sargara, Bajania, Mina and Chamar as lower then themselves and do not take food and water at their hands. A Girasia is given lower status in his society if he marries a girl from a family considered to be of low status within the community or with Bhil or other cast girl, considered lower than the Girasia. Girasia are closely linked up with kumhar, lohar, and hargada form a very useful class. Kumhar make earthen pots for domestic use and for the persian wheels. The kumhar occupy a special social status, being the highest cast. Lohars ranks as a low caste and they manufacture iron and steel made implement for people. Hargadas make pattals and dounas (leaf plates and leaf cup). Bhils are closely linked to Girasia and even their house and culture are similar to Girasia tribe.

CLAN SYSTEM:

The Girasia are organized into clans. Each clan traces its descent to a legendary, common founding ancestor who lived in the distant past. The clan nature of the Girasia depends on the individual substance as the color of the body, eating habits, and other biological regulations. A clan is further subdivided into subclans called adakh (gotra). All persons belonging to a clan and its various adakhs regard themselves as related to a common source and therefore form an exogamous group. The adakh names of a clan are its monopoly, and no two clans can have common adakhs. Marriage relations are possible only among different clans. The adakh of the Girasia may be named after plants, trees, vegetables, animals, and memorable incidents etc.

The Girasia of different clans live for the most part in separate phalies of a village. Every Girasia must indicate his adakh as part of his name, thereby maintaining his social identity. A person is related to all those who bear the same adakh name. This practice enables them to enforce the exogamous injunctions at the time of marital contracts. Thus, the clan among the Girasia becomes primarily a social class. The women of a clan and its subclans are considered sisters.

VILLAGE COUNCIL AND SOCIAL CONTROL:

The Girasia did not allow any outsider, including the police or military of the state, to enter their habitation area in the Bhakar. The Girasia guards performed the watch duties from the top of the hill and played the war drum to communicate crises.

The Girasia tribe, living in extreme poverty and backwardness without any modern amenities, has been able to maintain its individuality and cultural traits because of the effective functioning of its social institutions i.e. panchayat, patel, bhopa, and the existence of clan structure. The institution of the panchayat in the tribal world is a recent addition and has affected the tribal rural dealings for the better, even the status of a patel (headman) is the most respected and honored person recognized.

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[8] Thofi (2004) "Tribes of Andhra Pradesh,(A demo-gen etc study)" chapter 3, Inter tribal relations, Abhijeet publications Delhi, page 50

ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS:

The Girasia social order is controlled by family, group, and clan organization, which enforce the customary laws regarding social obligations and practices. This accepted control mechanism of the Girasia society ensures compliance with the customary law by awarding punishment to all those who violate the laws. A second control mechanism is fear of supernatural powers and terror of black magic.

THE PATEL:

A patel is a customary leader with considerable prestige and a living institution of authority. He is either the leader of a village or of a patta (region). Originally, the patel was the head of the tribe who acquired new areas for habitation. This office was hereditary, succession in cases of absence of direct heirs being decided according to custom. His main duty is to arbitrate between individuals and groups, and also in case of disputes among clans. The patels were exempted from paying land revenue instead of their services in the management of the village. They used to decide all types of criminal cases and award punishment. They alone had the authority to grant land to a newcomer for settlement called khoota. The patel as numbardar was responsible for the collection of revenue and rent.

CONSTITUTION OF TRIBAL PANCHAYAT:

"The term "Panchayat" refers to patterns of Indian village government of ancient origin in which five men ('panch' means five) conduct free and open hearings on complaints and claims made by fellow villagers. "The traditional panchayat could be the governing body of an entire village or a caste segment of the village. In the modern administrative scheme, the panchayat area or Panchayat Raj has been organized to include a small number of villages or a population of number less than one thousand, the governing committee of this Panchayat area is elected by secret ballet with all adult male and female resident in the area granted the right to vote"[9].

"The Girasia are governed by their own panchayat system. The Panchas or Patels settle their dispute if both parties are Girasia and the case is seldom reported to the police"[10].

"Panchayat has been decided to be the basic unit for developmental activities in rural India. But in the case of tribal areas, it has been recommended that statutory panchayats may be introduced only where tribal councils are not working effectively"[11].

"The tribal panchayat is a mobile court of justice which moves from village to village whenever disputes arise. Generally, it is held at a nearby place of dispute as near as possible. It is held in the shadow of a dense tree. All the patels sit on a zazam (a big piece of red cloth and which is considered the seat of dharamraj)"[12].

The tribal panchayat is the highest tribunal to decide all inter-village disputes, all civil and criminal cases of appeals against village panchayats, and to decide cases of social mobility and excommunication. It interprets the customary law on the principle of natural justice. The tribal panchayats are very strict and rigid in the execution of the traditional tribal laws and can impose heavy fines, which have a greater effect than the capital punishments to tribal offenders who fear death less than the loss of property, as property is the only source of subsistence. The panchas inflict fine on the persons found guilty and the amount of fine depends on the nature of the case.

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[9] Shakti Malik(1977) "The Dynamics of Santal Traditions In A Present Society", Published by Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, Page 109

[10] B.N.Dhoundiyal (1967) "Rajasthan District Gazetteer, Sirohi", Government Central Press, Jaipur, Page 103.

[11] S.N.Bhattacharya (1995) "The Adivasis", The Publications Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, Published by The Director, Publications Division, Delhi-8.

[12] B.L.Meharda (1985) "History and Culture of The Girasias", Adi Prakashan, Jaipur, Page 114.

The tribals in different parts of the southern Aravalli region are passing through an accelerated phase of transformation. The equilibrium between the new and old generations is tilted. They have their traditional and social values. After the introduction of the panchayat in the villages, the tribal headman (patel) has lost his position, and the powers have shifted to the panchayat. In the tribal villages, education and Panchayat Raj system have been introduced. The present problem of caste and class prejudices among the tribals is gradually diminishing.

Art and Craft: Broadly speaking, art is considered as one of a universal aspect of human culture.

"Under the broad definition of the art, any activity related to the art is considered in which the resulting performance of the object made over and above its efficiency or utility, affords a greater or less satisfaction to the one who produces it or to those who may view it. Painting, sculpture, music, professional dancing and drama, pottery, and opera are generally recognized as art"[13].

"Tribal crafts are magnificent examples of art. They are beautiful specimens of tribal art as well as the skill of tribal artists, but the tribal crafts are not well known outside their immediate regions. Their crafts primarily cater to very specialized tribal needs, sociological, aesthetical and personal use. In such art works, wood carving terracotta and metal works are important. Each tribal group seems to emphasis some practical foring of creative expressions among their many talents"[14].

The layout of the tribal dwellings in this part of the Aravalli is very simple and mainly constructed of the local building material available at hand. They draw, crude images of men riding camels or horses on their walls, do decorate their houses at the time of festivals and marriages. The walls are first washed with red earth, and when they dry, the figures of women bringing water, birds, and flowers are drawn by thick lime or red earth. They also paint the wooden doors and draw some designs on them with white clay. Girasia houses are found decorated with the pictures of their family members and Hindu gods and goddesses, and hang on the wall of the front door of the living room.

"As a homeland, there must be places depicting things and activities involving people in their day-to-day and community life. The people would be roaming in the surroundings of trees and animals to a greater need, often sharing a common platform with animals. The figures of human, animals, and trees may be generally drawn haphazardly to show their intermingling as ecosystem"[15].

The Girasia are self dependent people and prepare their own houses and bamboo articles such as winnowing pans, baskets, kothlas to store grain and walls of split bamboos for their dwellings. They are also able to prepare Rahat or pavtis required by them for drawing water from their wells for irrigation. They also take some help from carpenters for preparing wood work. They prepare ropes out of the roots of the palash tree or other fibers. They also prepare their wooden implements required for the agricultural work and wooden khats. The women also prepare mud jars for storing grain, and also smaller mud vessels for miscellaneous use.

[13] R.Singh (1999) "Naturalistic Vision of Tribal Art", Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, page 99.

[14] R.Singh (1999) "Naturalistic Vision of Tribal Art", Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, page 128.

[15] Mamta Mayee (1992) "Unveiling Habitat In Tribal Painting" (ed) G.P.Gupta, Socio-Cultural Environment of Tribal Landscape, Arihant Publishers, Jaipur, Page 376.

RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION:

The religion of the Girasia is considered a mixture of animism and Hinduism. Their superstitions, beliefs in ghosts and evil spirits, still control their social norms and functions.

"Tribal beliefs subsume 'animism' and 'polytheism'. The myths and legends provide them with sanctions they worship, all types of spirits, whether benevolent or malevolent. Their huts, villages, fields and forests are all full of sacred centers. The religious festivals are eagerly awaited by the tribals. The ancestral spirits claim worship from their descendants. They mediate between the tribesmen and the gods. It is also observed that the tribals have blended their beliefs and rituals with other faiths. A very few have adopted Hinduism from their close neighbors, associates, and a role model for centuries"[16].

The study of the religion of Girasia living in the non assimilated villages makes it evident that the religious beliefs and practices of the people are animistic in origin. All objects of nature, trees, stones and rivers are believed to be animated by spirits to whom all movement and acts, good or evil are ascribed. The other villages which lie in the plains show signs of assimilation with Hinduism and possess religious elements which are evidently external to their indigenous beliefs and practices.

Some important god and goddesses are – 'gune', 'kanha', 'mahadev', 'ambaji', 'kala and gora bhairu', 'ganpati', 'hanuman', 'heshnag', 'dharmraj', 'heetala mata', 'indra' etc. Hanuman is a late entrant in the pantheon of gods of the Girasias but is worshipped on equal footing with the two bhairus, kala and gora who are benevolent and deemed to be brothers. Natural features such as sun, rain, thunder, water, air etc. are the vavsies in the Girasia belief system. They have also evolved a clan goddess called gotraj, which maintains their clan's individuality. Each clan worships its own gotraj. All gotraj – 'kalika', 'meskali', 'gaur', 'amia', 'ashapuri', 'chamunda', 'hitala mata', 'hilav', or 'khimla' are theoretically sisters and worshipped on marriage and festive occasions.

Bhopa - Bhopa is a person who shields people from fear of evil spirits. He is basically a worshipper (priest) who tries to secure blessings from gods and goddesses and vavsies. He is able to tell the people about the spirits that have affected them. The Bhopa performs the worship and reaches a trance. He knows magic (veddya). He also hears bolma and conveys to vavsi.

Devala - Devala literally means a man who drives away vala (danger). He is a sorcerer who practices magic and magical rites and offers worship to spirits with whom he is supposed to have direct links. The devala, on account of his role in controlling the diseases, became a 'physician-cum-magician' in the society. He removes the ill effects of spirits by the use of magical spells and charms, whereas Bhopa warns off the dangers of offering worship to the gods.

Despite these Girasia worship Ghodadev (called Bhakar dev in Bhakar area) and Bhumiya the Ghodadev is the protector of the village, while the Bhumiya is the protector of the field. The Girasia have great belief in supernatural powers of vavsi, who thinks of their economic and social well-being and fulfill their desires.

FOOD:

"The economic condition of the people enables them only to consume 'kura' and jowar, wheat, barley, gram, 'moong', maize, and kulath as their common food.

Bhil, Girasia and other similar castes take meat on the birth of a child. Some people prepare laapsi (a preparation of gur, ghee and dalia of wheat). The food of the mother during the delivery period consists of sunth pak, ajma and raab prepared from the floor, gur, and ghee"[17].

[16] Dr. B.A.Deshmukh (2004) "Tribal Education", Sonali Publications, New Delhi.

[17] B.N.Dhoundiyal (1967) "Rajasthan District Gazetteer, Sirohi", Government Central Press, Jaipur, Page 223.

"They use coarse grains such as maize, bajra, jowar, kura, barley, gujji, gram, and moong for thick cakes. The cake is called jhati, bati or sogra, if the floor of only one of these grains is used, other mixture is known as bharia, ordher-ka-sogra. These are eaten with chhach, dal, uncooked onions or chilies. In rural areas, people also eat kheech prepared from dalia of barley or wheat and ghaat from maize. Kheech and ghaat are taken along with onions and chhach.

The vegetables used are radish, brinjal, methi, onion, potatoes, lady finger, cauliflower, tindsi, sua-palak, chanevaria etc. On special occasions like marriage or a feast, laapsi are very common. Coconut and gur is the most favorite sweet dish of Girasia. The non-vegetarian dish includes meat, fish and eggs"[18].

TATTOOING (MANDLLA):

"Tattoo is the main traditional decorative art among the tribes, according to Goldenweiser. Almost all societies in the world use tattooing extensively or sparingly. It is the most popular way amongst tribes to decorate their bodies"[19].

"Tattooing: In Rajasthan, the tattooers join the village fairs with their instruments and an album of designs. They present the album to customers who want to get tattooed. The customers select the design, and the artist informs them of the remuneration he expects. After having settled the deal, the artist starts his work on the skin with his needle. As the operation is done in public, the customer avoids crying or expressing pain"[20].

Tattooing is done by pressing soot mixed with mustard oil into the skin with a needle, deep enough to be mixed with blood and leave a permanent mark on the skin. Tattooing on the face is called mandlia and on the body is called mandlla. The Girasia women folk are very keen in tattooing. Mandlia (tattooing) is prevalent for enhancement of beauty, force of custom (dharo) and belief (vimi). Tattooing done by men on the arms hands and feet is always very thin and consists of few dots or figures of scorpion or a flower. The women get tattooing, is done thickly on arms, feets and on the face. Man tattooing is disappearing. Instead, the women decorate their bodies by applying mehandi to their hands, a practice most common among Hindus.

a. "Tattooing marks and designs of flora and fauna e.g. peacock, scorpion, and parrots.
b. Religious tattooing, figure or savji, vavsi, and auspicious marks of swastik on the hand.
c. Names of lovers and life partners.
d. Miscellaneous designs, tibki or tillu (dotted) line over cheeks, hands, eyes etc.
e. Bhopa and Develas get magical designs tattooed"[21].

[18] B.N.Dhoundiyal (1967) "Rajasthan District Gazetteer, Sirohi", Government Central Press, Jaipur page 111,112.

[19] R.Singh(1999) "Naturalistic Vision of Tribal Art", Chapter V, Tattoo: Traditional decorative arts among the tribes, Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, page 103.

[20] O.P.Joshi (1992). "Tattooing and Tattooers", Chapter1, A Socio-Cultural Analysis, Anthropology of Symbols, Published by Parnami S.K., Parnami R.K., R.B.S.H.Publishers, Jaipur, , page 5

[21] B.L.Meharda (1985), History and Culture of The Girasias, Adi Prakashan, Jaipur, Page 144.

USE OF INTOXICANTS (NESSO):

"People mostly smoke bidi and hukka in the village and bidi and cigarettes in the towns. Most castes obtain from liquor. The Rajput, Bhil, and Girasia are the only castes fond of drinking and their quarrels, it is said, begins and ends in drunken bout"[22].

The Girasia are much addicted to liquor which is distilled from the flowers of the Mahua tree (Bossia latifolia) or from the bark of the Babul, Goriya, Reej, Hadvaa and Mal Kakani. All the rituals and ceremonies are performed by the pouring of liquor drops (dhar) for they have a belief that the deities and gods can be satisfied only with its offering. No worship or offering is complete without liquor. Besides the occasions of the festivals and ceremonies, the Girasia also enjoy liquor at the time of harvest or during a visit to another village. Men and children (above 8 years) drink excessively. The distillation of liquor is done secretly in nearby forests. Many Girasia were found in a state of dead drunkenness. They are addicted to liquor and take it in excess. Tobacco is not eaten, but tobacco smoking is common.

WEAPONS:

"Girasias are expert bowmen and they keep bow and arrow for hunting and personal protection"[23].

Girasia of the interior region always carry arms such as a bow and arrow, a big knife, a sword, or a gun. The bow and arrow are still the common tribal weapons of the Girasia. The sword is also used to perform the sacrifice. "The Girasia are very fond of keeping weapons with them for kohalwa (protection) against wild animals, for hunting, and for their maan (prestige and social status). Stick is essential weapon to be taken by every Girasia, whenever they go to another village and town"[24].

Tukki is used only when the object is to be knocked down. Even women know the use of bow and arrow and are perfect in its operation, keeping arms is a symbol of prestige and power.

The Girasia tribe embodies a unique blend of Rajput valor and Bhil traditions, resulting in a culturally rich and socially intricate community. Their enduring clan systems, religious practices, and self-governing institutions underscore a robust indigenous identity. Despite the encroachment of modernization and state-led governance, the Girasias have adeptly preserved core elements of their heritage while embracing contemporary norms. This dynamic interplay between tradition and change positions the Girasia tribe as a compelling subject for further anthropological and socio-political research

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[22] B.N.Dhoundiyal (1967), Rajasthan District Gazetteer, Sirohi, Government Central Press, Jaipur, page 108.

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