



## TRIBAL SOCIETY IN INDIA: A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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### I]ABSTRACT

**T**ribal people over the years have become the most disadvantaged, exploited and the neglected lot in our society. Primarily they live in the forests and are considered as the most backward and undeveloped. Their identity is in grave danger, since the forest cover in the country has drastically been reduced causing unnatural damage to the environment and forests they were living in.

This research paper designed to show cultural emancipation of tribal society and quintessential obstructions, challenges and prospectus of their society in establishing themselves in Indian politics. It gives broader spectrum and all-purpose vision of their participation in Indian politics.

**II]KEYWORDS :** Tribes, Non-Government Organizations, Political Hegemony, Weaker section, Tribal Communities, Subaltern Society, and Legal Aid etc.

### III] OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To identify quintessence of tribal culture and sustainability of their ethnicity and way of life .
2. To determine the level of Political awareness and its dimensions - Political Interest, Political

participation, Political responsibility, Political efficacy among tribal

3. To determine the influence of personal, social and economic factors of Political awareness among tribal
4. To measure the metamorphosis of their tradition and modern background.

### IV] INTRODUCTION:

The Gonds are one of the most famous and important tribes in India, known for their unique customs and traditions. They are mainly a nomadic tribe and call themselves as Koytoria. The term 'Gond' is derived from the Telugu word 'Konda' which means

hill. Gond Tribes are primarily located in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, eastern Maharashtra, northern Andhra Pradesh and western Orissa. With a population of over 4 million, Gonds also form the largest tribal group in central India. In Chhattisgarh, Gonds are the largest tribal group in terms of population and are mainly concentrated in the southern part of the state. More than 20% of Gonds in Chhattisgarh live in Bastar region only. There are 3 major sub-castes of Gonds in Bastar – Maria, Muria and Dorla.

The Gonds are an important and numerous tribe, residing at the present time mainly in Gondavana the easternmost districts of Madhya Pradesh, formerly the Central Provinces of India. They were first called Gonds (hill men)



by the Mogul rulers. The latest available Census figures are from 1971, when there were 4,728,796 Gonds—one of the largest tribal groups on earth. In fact, the number of Gonds is really much higher, since many Gond communities have been fully accepted into the Hindu caste system, have adopted another name, and have completely abandoned their original tribal ways of life. While some Gond subsections thus have been lost to the tribe, some communities of different origin may have been incorporated into the Gond tribe. The Bisonhorn Marias of Bastar may be such a tribe.

The racial history of the Gonds is unknown. From their physical appearance it is obvious that they differ from the Aryan and Dravidian speakers settled in the country. According to B. S. Guha, they are Proto-Australoids by race like the Oraons and Maler of Chota Nagpur Plateau. It is unknown when and by which route they arrived in this part of India. At one time they must have been settled in the hills between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, because their dialect, Gondi, is closely related to the languages of those regions. R. V. Russell and Hira Lal maintain that only between the ninth and thirteenth centuries a.d. did the Gonds come and settle in Present-day Gondavana. They became progressive and wealthy farmers and were gradually transformed into Ragbansi Rajputs. When the ruling Rajput dynasties in these regions Declined, Gonds established themselves as rulers at four centers. The zenith of their might was from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Then the Marathas under a Bhonsle ruler of Nagpur overran their country and completely dispossessed them of their power except in the hill fastnesses, which held out against all invaders.

The Gonds invariably live in villages. But in each village the Gonds live in a hamlet of their own. The hamlet is not a closed cluster of huts, for the Gonds' homesteads are spread over a large area within the hamlet. Each homestead houses a family, often a joint family consisting of the families of the married sons living with their parents. In the plains where the Gonds are more Sanskritized, or influenced by high Hindu culture, some have adopted Hindu ways and begun to live in closed villages, yet apart from the other castes and tribes.

A normal marriage among the Gonds is the monogamous union of a man and a woman based on mutual choice, sanctioned by the ceremonial exchange of vows, with the approval of the tribal council, witnessed by the relatives of the partners and the village community, and concluded with a festive wedding dinner. Although the Gonds have liberal views on premarital sex, they are strict in the observance of married fidelity. They believe that adultery is punished by the ancestral spirits that can cause crop failure or an epidemic among humans and cattle. A Gond wedding is solemnized with many significant ceremonies. The essential wedding rite consists of the groom walking with his bride seven times around a wedding post erected in the center of the wedding booth. Marriage is obligatory. Originally Gond boys and girls married on reaching physical maturity. Nowadays the Gonds increasingly follow the example of the rural Hindu population and parents arrange the marriage when children are still young. The father of the groom has to pay a bride-price, the amount of which depends on the position and wealth of the two families. Cross-cousin marriages are much preferred, so much so that a youth has to pay a fine if he refuses to marry an available cross cousin. A Gond can have more than one wife, polygyny being restricted only by the capability of the man to support a number of wives. The Gonds practice the sororate and the levirate. Widow marriage is forbidden only among the Sanskritized Gonds. Gonds who are too poor to pay the bride-price and the wedding expenses contract a Service marriage. Families with no sons prefer such a marriage arrangement. Other more irregular forms of marriage among the Gonds are the elopement of an unmarried girl with a boy or the capture of a girl and her forced marriage to her captor. Marriage by capture was in the past a popular form of Marriage among the Gonds. The marriage must later be legalized by the relatives and village councils of the partners. The Gonds permit divorce and easily resort to it for various reasons. For instance, a man may obtain a divorce if his wife is barren, quarrelsome, or negligent in doing her assigned work. Likewise, a woman may elope with another man if her husband is a bad provider, a drunkard, or a wife beater, or if he is habitually unfaithful. A divorce requires the legal sanction of the tribal council of the village.

The entire Gond tribe was never a political unit. Tribal solidarity does not extend beyond the confines of a subsection. The basic political unit is the Gond village community. It is a democratic organization in which the headman and other officials are chosen by the villagers. Each village has its council, with officials like the headman, the priest, the village watchman, and four or five elders. More important affairs are discussed and decided upon by all the men of the community. A village has also its servant castes, such as the Ahir (cowherds),

Agaria (blacksmiths), Dhulia (drummers), and Pardhan (bards and singers). At the towns of Garha-Mandla, Kharla, Deogarh, and Chanda, the leading headmen managed to rise to the rank of rulers (rajās) and to establish dynasties that lasted for centuries. But the very fact that these rajās surrounded themselves with Hindu officials and eagerly adopted Hindu or Mogul methods of administration proves that royalty was alien to tribal democracy. In the present political situation the Gonds are, despite their numbers, politically powerless, which is partly because of this Tribal disunity but also because of their comparative lack of education and drive, and their great poverty. Those few Gonds who are members of the legislative assemblies or even the national parliament (Lok Sabha) are either alienated from their tribal culture or easily manipulated by other politicians.

The religion of the Gonds does not differ much from that of the numerous other tribes in central India. Like them, the Gonds believe in a high god whom they call either by his Hindu name, "Bhagwan," or by his tribal name, "Bara Deo," the "Great God." But he is an otiose deity and is rarely worshiped, though his name is often invoked. He is a personal god—eternal, just, merciful, maker of the fertile earth and of man—though the universe is conceived as coexisting with him. In the Gond belief system, besides this high god there also exist a great number of male and female deities and spirits that personify various natural features. Every hill, river, lake, tree, and rock is inhabited by a spirit. The earth, water, and air are ruled by deities that must be venerated and appeased with sacrifices and offerings. These deities and spirits may be benevolent, but often they are capricious, malevolent, and prone to harming human beings, especially Individuals who have made themselves vulnerable by breaking a rule of the tribal code. The deities and spirits, especially the ancestor spirits, watch over the strict observance of the tribal rules and punish offenders.

Gonds distinguish between priests and magicians. The village priest is appointed by the village council; however, his appointment is often hereditary. His responsibility is to perform all the sacrifices held at Certain feasts for the village community for which he receives a special remuneration. Sacrifices and religious ceremonies on family occasions are usually performed by the head of the family. The diviners and magicians, on the other hand, are unofficial charismatic intermediaries between the supernatural world and human beings. The Gonds, like the other Tribals of central India, believe that most diseases and misfortunes are caused by the machinations of evil spirits and offended deities. It is the task of the soothsayers and diviners to find out which supernatural agencies have caused the Present sickness or misfortune and how they can be appeased. If soothsayers and diviners cannot help, magicians and shamans must be employed. Magicians believe that by magic formulas and devices they can force a particular deity or spirit to carry out their commands. Shamans are persons who easily fall into trances and are then believed to be possessed by deities or spirits that prophesy through their mouths. These frequent ecstasies do not seem to have any detrimental mental or physical effects on the shamans, who may be male or female. Magic may be "white" or "black": it is white if it counteracts black magic or effects a cure when a sickness has been caused by black magic. Gonds also believe in the evil eye and in witchcraft. A witch is usually a woman who by her evil power brings sickness and death to people in the neighborhood. When discovered, she is publicly disgraced and expelled from the village or even killed.

The Gonds celebrate many feasts connected mainly with the agricultural seasons and with life-cycle events (birth, marriage, sickness, and death). On all festive occasions sacrifices and offerings are performed either by the Official village priest, by the soothsayers and magicians, or by the head of the family that is celebrating an event. All these Sacrifices are accompanied by appropriate ceremonies of symbolic significance. The offerings and sacrifices can be either animal or vegetable; it depends on the type of deity being addressed. Female deities generally demand that blood be spilled; the victims are usually chickens or goats, sometimes male buffalo, and, occasionally in the past, human beings. Vegetable offerings include fruits (especially coconuts), flowers, colored powder, and strings.

Like most tribals, the Gonds are accomplished artisans and can manufacture almost all the implements they require for their work on the farm and in the forest, all furniture in house and kitchen, and all of their ornaments and decorations. They are artistically gifted: they paint their house walls with artistic designs, and they carve memorial pillars in wood and stone for their dead. They have invented various original dances and are passionate dancers. They are good musicians on the drum, the flute, and other instruments. They are good singers, though the melodies of their songs sometimes sound monotonous and may not be of their own

invention. They are inventive in composing new songs, folktales, legends, and myths and in retelling them dramatically. They have composed a great epic celebrating the origins and exploits of a Culture hero named Lingo.

The Gonds are fully aware that certain diseases have a natural cause, and they know many jungle medicines to cure such diseases. But when these remedies remain ineffective, they resort to magical devices.

After death an adult Gond man or woman is cremated; children are buried without much Ceremony. Ceremonies are performed at the funeral to prevent the soul of the deceased from finding its way back to its house and village. The Gonds believe in an afterlife. They believe each human being has two souls, the life spirit and the shadow. The shadow must be prevented from returning to its home, or it will harm the surviving relatives. The life spirit goes to Bhagwan to be judged and rewarded by reincarnation into a higher form or punished in a pool of biting worms; after a while the soul is reborn and begins a new life. Others believe that the soul joins the other ancestors of the clan, especially after a stone memorial has been erected. Still others believe that the soul is absorbed in Bhagwan or Bara Deo. The belief in the survival of the ancestral spirits is, however, quite strong. These ancestor spirits watch over the moral behavior of the living Gond and punish offenders of tribal law. Thus they act as strict guardians of the Gond community.

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