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'Othering' *Adivasi* Identities
Perpetuating Tribal Stereotypes among the Bhil of India

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Résumé de l'article

En se concentrant sur la communauté indigène Bhil dans le centre de l'Inde, cet article examine le rôle des politiques coloniales britanniques dans la formation d'une « identité tribale », et comment la postcolonialité, ou la condition postcoloniale, continue de façonner cette identité. Cet article examine le pouvoir de catégoriser des gouvernements colonial et contemporain, et comment ces catégories persistent dans la conscience du gouvernement indien, des communautés dominantes et, le plus important, parmi les communautés autochtones elles-mêmes. La modernisation et le développement des Bhil (parmi d'autres communautés autochtones) ont été un objectif national pour l'État-nation depuis l'indépendance. Selon les politiques de développement indiennes, la construction d'une communauté agraire autosuffisante et autonome est dans le meilleur intérêt de la nation et de sa croissance économique. Je soutiens que loin de dépeindre une identité nationale unifiée pour montrer modernité et progrès au monde, les politiques indiennes ont plutôt créé des identités politisées, qui servent à perpétuer les stéréotypes et à contenir leurs sujets dans des cycles d'exploitation de la dette, de la dépendance et du développement.

'OTHERING' ADIVASI IDENTITIES
Perpetuating Tribal Stereotypes among the Bhil of India

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Colonial paradigms with a tendency to dichotomize have given rise to a number of organizing tropes that continue to define much of Indian society. Distinctions between caste and tribe, developed and underdeveloped, progressive and backward, and, ultimately, modern (desired) and traditional (undesired) hark back to India's colonial past. These are enduring constructs that shape both current policies on and popular narratives about tribal development by the Central Government and mainstream (caste) communities, respectively. Additionally, tribal identities in India are often conceived by the tribal communities themselves on the basis of such narratives. As I illustrate in this paper, these imaginaries of identity not only generate perceptions of what it means to be Bhili in the eyes of outsiders, but also produce a self-representation within the Bhili community.

The indigenous Bhil are one of the largest tribes in India. Their settlements spread wide across the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat. They are listed among the Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution of India, which entitles them to certain welfare benefits and protections from the state,[2] as enshrined in the constitution. Bhil history is one of a community that has been repeatedly and consistently exploited by the state and non-tribal communities in the colonial and postcolonial periods, by means of dispossession of land and natural resources. Impoverishment and immiseration have thus become hallmarks of Bhil identity in both the national imaginary and the Bhil community. After India gained independence in 1947, several state-funded welfare projects were implemented to support agriculture and combat increasing impoverishment

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2. Throughout the paper, the term "state" refers to the institutions of government (federal and otherwise) unless specified as the formal administrative division of the Indian federation into various states.

of the Bhil. These were government-controlled projects, consisting of handouts during times of agricultural stress, such as periods of drought, which neglected the underlying causes of tribal impoverishment (Baviskar 1995: 81). As a result, Bhil dependence on the state increased, due to these and other social factors, which are examined in this paper.

Post-independence, it became important for India to demonstrate its modernity and progress to the world and take its place in the hierarchical system that shaped (and continues to shape) international relations. In its need to be seen as a unified, modern nation, India undertook the uphill task of reconciling its plurality of communities under a singular nationalistic sentiment. In this regard, the many marginalized and impoverished groups were perceived as an obstacle to its image as a modern, developed nation. Specifically, the status of historically disenfranchised tribal or *adivasi* communities was viewed as antithetical to the state's image of socioeconomic progress. The creation of independent India was synonymous with the creation of a "development regime" (Ludden 1992). Thus, *adivasi* groups such as the Bhil have become rooted in the imaginations of the state as in need of development and have been targeted by various welfare projects over the past 70 years as a way to bring them into the fold of a modern state.

To fully encapsulate the fraught and complex relationship between the Bhil and the state, this paper will first examine the antecedents of tribal identity, taking the colonial period as a starting point. Second, it will highlight the power of the colonial and contemporary governments to categorize social groups, and the manner in which these categories are mobilized today by the groups themselves in the attempt to gain access to resources, such as employment and education, through a system of reservations or affirmative action.[3] It will demonstrate how colonial perceptions of tribal identity persist in the consciousness of the Indian government, mainstream communities, and among the *adivasi* themselves, often shaping the social, political, and economic treatment of the latter.

Based on extensive field research conducted over a period of 12 months from 2012-2013 in the district of Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh,[4] this

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3.   Reservation quotas are reservation of seats in educational institutions and employment posts in public services for members of Scheduled Tribes and other minority groups as a form of affirmative action policy.

4.   Ethnographic data for this paper were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, household surveys, and informal conversations with members of the Bhil local communities and members of caste communities residing in towns.

paper reveals how categories of classification shape Bhil identity and self-representation in very particular ways. I analyze Bhil identity from three points of view: first, through the lens of neighboring mainstream communities; second, through ethnographic examples demonstrating how the Bhil become embroiled in exploitative relationships that perpetuate their indebtedness and often contribute to dependency on the state; and lastly, through analyses of Bhil self-representation, "rational" versus "irrational" behaviors, and resistance to mainstream perceptions of the Bhil as powerless actors without agency. I conclude that although Bhil identities are increasingly aligned with mainstream Hindu "modern" communities, this is done on their terms, often helping both Bhil men and women with access to resources.

Colonial History: Anthropology and ordering a "race"

The idea of dispossession is so embedded in Bhil folklore that, according to legend, Bhil ancestors fought with the god of clouds and, as a result, they were punished with scanty rainfall every passing year (Das 2008). This legend is symbolic of the intergenerational inequity that plagues the community, where progressive impoverishment is explained through myth, failing to attribute responsibility to external factors like state policies and exploitative socioeconomic relationships. Consequently, the Bhil are viewed as irresponsible and ungrateful for their access to an array of development projects and welfare schemes, and the question of why the Bhil continue to remain dependent on welfare persists. I contend that the answer to this question can be found in the history of tribal exploitation and identity (ethnicity) politics.

In precolonial India, the distinction drawn between caste (mainstream) and tribal communities was crucial to justifying colonial presence. Instituted on the "rule of difference" (Chatterjee 1993), colonialism required the creation of distinctions between the colonizers and the colonized, on the one hand, and among various populations within these colonies, on the other hand. In the process, colonial categories based on Western conceptions of race were imposed on the local landscape, elevating the Hindu (dominant) population and placing tribal groups on a lower cultural level. Early attempts at understanding social and demographic data in precolonial India were born out of British concern for erasing the practice of female infanticide. These later developed into attempts to organize Indian society into groups categorized on the basis of occupation and social structure for administrative

purposes (Bates 1995). For instance, groups were labeled moneylenders, farmers, martial groups, and so on, the most controversial being "criminal groups" who were designated as habitual criminals.[5]

The earliest census data of 1865, 1872, and 1881 relied on the ancient Brahminic classifications of society into four castes or *varnas–Brahmins* (priestly group), *Kshatriyas* (warrior group), *Vaishyas* (artisans, merchants, traders) and *Sudras* (the lowest caste). According to Crispin Bates (1995), these classifications were of no real administrative use as they were very broad. Neither did they accurately represent the practical relationships between different groups and how they interacted with each other. Another theory that more strongly influenced racial categorization in India was proposed by Sir William Jones, an Anglo-Welsh philologist, in the late eighteenth century. Jones posited that, at some point in the past, the Dravidian races in India had been invaded by people belonging to the Aryan races of Central Asia. Resultant races, or castes, were formed by the mixing of the two races, and hierarchy among them was determined by the degree of mixing. Those with more Aryan blood (the higher status Brahmins) were determined to be superior in status and ranking to those with more Dravidian blood (lower status indigenous groups). The intermediate castes were formed by degrees of miscegenation between the two polar races (Bates 1995).

According to this theory, a subsequent impact of the Aryan invasion was the displacement of the original inhabitants of India, the aboriginal or indigenous communities. Colonial administrative literature collected from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century shows that, very early on, British officials perceived a difference between the hill and forest communities of India and those living in the plains. Based on the Aryan invasion theory, they determined that the former were descendants of the indigenous groups (Skaria 1997). Despite specific dissimilarities between numerous hill and forest communities, only similarities were noticed. Notably, these perceived resemblances hinged more on their difference to plains communities rather than actual likenesses with each other.

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5.   These were groups, for the most part tribal, that were criminalized based on their supposed propensity towards banditry. Such criminalization was supported by policy (for example, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871) enacted to control the more "turbulent populations in the more inaccessible or 'lawless' parts of the subcontinent" (Bates 1995: 8). Many tribes of central India (or the Central Province, as it was known then), including the Bhil, were labeled as such.

Based on ancient Hindu mythology, such a racial/cultural hierarchy between dominant caste groups and tribal communities was not a factual historical representation of India's extremely large and diverse population. Hinduized or Sanskritic depictions of tribal groups heavily influenced colonial categories and were always derogatory. Since there is a general absence of written historical accounts of tribal groups, except for those in Sanskritic texts or, later, colonial ones, it is impossible to ascertain the actual origins of the Bhil (Bates 1995). It is noteworthy that all the Bhil's own origin stories also find their foundation in Hindu legends, "showing a desire on the part of the Bhils to connect themselves with the dominant race" (Prasad 1991: 44) and implying that Bhil identity formation has always been in juxtaposition to its neighboring mainstream communities. Origin stories tell similar tales of the Bhil as "wicked," "depraved," and prone to violence (Das 2008; Prasad 1991). These strongly suggest that the Bhil have internalized depictions of themselves as the "other" to mainstream caste groups. In this grain, Asoka Kumar Sen asks whether "ethnic communities should always be viewed as the other of the dominant groups and whether the dominant/other representation should continue to hold centrestage" (Sen 2018: 7-8). Importantly, the perpetuation of such representation through national policies is problematic.

Whether through William Jones's theory of a foreign invasion subjugating the indigenous population of India or of more powerful kingdoms displacing the "plains" people to the "hill and forests," the British administration persistently and repeatedly underscored the existence of *logical*, racial differences between India's caste and tribal communities in an attempt to subordinate and rule (Washbrook 1990). Thus, when the British administration set out to define the "hill and forest" dwellers of India as tribes, they did so by juxtaposing them against the "plains" communities, imagining and amplifying their differences with plains or caste communities, to create a list of Indian tribes by the late nineteenth century. This is the list that is still used by the independent Government of India to shape policy and practice towards these communities.[6] According to Skaria (1997), these distinctions became definitive by the 1860s, when the colonial administration began to shape practices and create policies based on them. By magnifying divisions based on essentialist qualities, the British administration equated ideas of primitiveness with tribal communities, and civilization with caste communities. Thus, Brahminic culture (and

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6. Ajay Skaria (1997) gives an extensive analysis of the creation of "wildness" among the tribes of India under British rule.

eventually Hinduism), which prescribed a rigid caste hierarchy, spread throughout the Indian territory under British rule and became established as the normative, mainstream culture (Washbrook 1990). This has had significant repercussions for contemporary Bhil identity, as I illustrate later.

A pivotal moment in the racial categorization of the Indian people occurred when Sir Herbert Risley introduced the European method of anthropometry to confirm "scientifically" the already existing racial prejudices in classification. Based on the cranial measurements of a very small sample size, Risley drew biased conclusions on the origins of specific castes and tribes and categorized the very diverse population of India into seven basic racial types. His findings were published in the seminal book *The People of India* in 1908, the data for which were collected starting in 1901, in the first survey of the whole of (colonial) India.

In 1931, the Census of India officially differentiated the terms "tribe" and "caste," and in 1935, "Scheduled Tribe" was added through the Government of India Act to legalize tribal groups as a protected minority.[7] However, nuancing the politics of tribal identity in independent India is more complicated than simply adopting colonial nomenclature. As I illustrate in the next section, when land rights and ownership of resources are concerned, categorization of communities becomes far more complex.

Post-independence: status of the *adivasi*

Post-independence, the distinction between tribe and caste was defined more systematically but continued in the colonial trend of defining tribes as coherent, ethnographic groups on the basis of perceived differences with caste communities rather than through similarities among themselves.[8] The constitution of independent India adopted the term Scheduled Tribe in order to implement affirmative action social policies or reservation quotas. As of October 27, 2016, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs website stated, "[S] cheduled tribes are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness" (Ministry of Tribal Affairs n.d.).[9] It further noted that, while

7. The Constitution of India, in Article 366 (25), defines Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution" (Ministry of Tribal Affairs n.d.).
8. See Xaxa 1999 for an excellent discussion on the "differences" that exist between tribal and caste groups.
9. See V. K. Srivastava 2008 for a critical analysis of this "criterion."

this "criterion" was not specifically mentioned in the constitution, it "has become well established" (Ministry of Tribal Affairs n.d.). Richard K. Wolf and Frank Heidemann (2014: 6–7) aptly summarize the epistemological fallacy in continuing to use colonial categories by stating:

> To include a named group as a Scheduled Tribe was to make a commitment to allocate material benefits to that group, and it therefore had implications for broader economic planning. The product was a list of Scheduled Tribes and a list of Scheduled Castes – one of the most highly contested artifacts of postcolonial India. These lists covered more than a quarter of the Indian population and became a major tool for the implementing of social policies in India. Now, for the first time in an officially printed form, tribals were represented as occupying the lowest rung of society. The government offered tribal communities support, usually education and employment opportunities; in all, more than a quarter of a billion people became the objects of such affirmative action.

The New People of India Project

On October 2, 1985, in response to the non-existence of reliable and updated data on the vast number of communities in the country, the Anthropological Survey of India (A.S.I) launched a People of India project, named after Risley's initial *The People of India* (1915). The intention of the new People of India project was to portray a unified nation-state. It was a project to demonstrate that "caste has not impeded national unity" (Jenkins 2003: 1145) and, despite differences, Indian people can still come together in the service of national goals. That there was no attempt to change the title of the new series or create distance from its colonial predecessor implied that there were to be no drastic changes in either the methodology of data collection or the type of data collected. In fact, a brief introduction to the series on the Anthropological Survey of India website by Singh, the Editor General of the *People of India* volumes until his death in 2006, states that, "[T]he objective of the project [is] to generate a brief, descriptive anthropological profile of all the communities of India, the impact on them of change and development processes and the links that bring them together" (Anthropological Survey of India n.d.). Following its colonial antecedents, anthropology in post-independent India merged yet again with state and administrative objectives, and the new *People of India* emerged in 1985 as an exceedingly political project, despite its intent to be an apolitical, academic compilation of human diversity within India (Jenkins 2003; Wolf and Heidemann 2014).

Throughout the series, there appears to be a distinct mechanism of othering the non-Hindu, non-dominant minority groups based on physical attributes, which presumably are markers of related groups. In a particularly illuminating statement, Singh recalls that while asking "informants" to self-identify which group they belong to, "[m]ost of the communities (62 per cent) reconstruct their identity from ethnographic accounts" (Singh 1998: xv), leaving us to wonder, as Jenkins has, "whether repeated ethnographic inquiries and accounts about varna have contributed to the public's awareness of such categories" (2003: 1153). The authors of the series indicated self-identification of groups as the preferred means to classify them; nevertheless, as the Indian government started relying more heavily on the data collected, this method became controversial. Singh also noted that, frequently, a group which was "attracted by the facilities extended to the [Scheduled Caste] or the [Scheduled Tribe], twist[ed] ethnographic accounts in its endeavor to identify itself with either of those constitutional categories" (2002: 10). Perhaps the project would have been better served by acknowledging that identity is fluid, and "twists" in self-identifying ethnographic accounts are very much an authentic claim in and of themselves that require no "untwisting," either by academics or administrators, and can be more effective in presenting a unified national identity.[10]

The intention of the new *People of India* series of projecting a nationally unified India greatly backfires when one considers the politicized identities created as a result of it. Risley's 1915 *People of India* was very much a self-acknowledged compilation of *difference* in India. It was a report in which he concluded, somewhat prophetically, that caste and nationalism would prove incompatible, and language and religious differences would become conflicted (Jenkins 2003). On the other hand, Singh intended his 1985 *People of India* to be a unifying force, an ethnographic compilation of Indian diversity that could show linkages between communities and explain Indian unity across diversity, demonstrating progress and upward class mobility, and portraying increasing equality of disadvantaged groups. However, groups that fall into Scheduled Tribe categories (an undeniably disadvantaged group) cannot mobilize the differences outlined between them and other, more privileged, communities in India, to gain better

10. Poignantly, in an interview conducted by Jenkins in 1996, the prominent anthropologist B. K. Roy Burman stated, "[T]he categories of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe are "policy" categories rather than "scientific" categories, thus making their use as ethnographically significant groups problematic (Jenkins 2003: 1156).

access to resources (Jenkins 2003). As the following ethnographic data that I collected demonstrates, rather than refining policies that can reduce discriminatory treatment, these "profiles" heighten distinction and often serve to undermine such policies.

The Indian state follows two types of policies for governing Scheduled Tribe communities: protective and developmental. Post-independence, India enacted the Land Transfer Regulation in states such as Madhya Pradesh, with large tribal populations in order to protect tribal land from outside encroachment. These regulations are meant to discourage other communities from purchasing tribal land. While such enactments are meant to protect tribal communities from dispossession, they are paternalistic and result in constraining options for tribal groups. For example, in the district of Jhabua, land outside tribal villages sells for approximately 28,000 to 50,000 USD[11] per acre, according to estimates I gathered from non-tribal community members. However, within the Bhil community, land sells at hugely discounted rates from anywhere between 2,800 to 28,000 USD[12] per acre, which disadvantages those Bhil who want to sell their land and pursue non-farming livelihood options. Despite such land protection policies, studies have found that dispossession of land has in fact increased post-independence (Xaxa 2004). Arguably, if members of tribal groups were allowed to sell their land within the protection of legal frameworks at non-discounted rates, then incidents of forced encroachment would diminish, tribal members would have access to more wealth and, in a fast-changing society, be able to detach themselves from non-productive land should they so choose.

In the following section, I illustrate how identity politics play out in the grassroots. Specifically, as particular imaginations of the Bhil rooted in colonialism, have shaped the official state perceptions and the informal ones of other communities, I nuance these externally imposed identities and analyze their impact on Bhil self-representation.

Contemporary Treatment of *Adivasis* in India: perpetuating stereotypes

Historically derived perceptions of the Bhil are stereotypical in nature and widespread among non-tribal communities. Such perceptions emphasize regressive and biased notions of the Bhil that serve to maintain extant social hierarchies of non-tribal and tribal communities. These

11. Approximately 20 to 35 lakh Rupees.
12. Approximately 2 to 25 lakh Rupees.

stereotypes are perpetuated and remain in use among mainstream caste communities.

I interacted frequently with members of caste communities living in the town of Jhabua, capital of Jhabua district, and Rasoli, a smaller neighboring town. Most were individuals who had been residing in the region for many decades, some for generations, therefore having had close interactions with Bhil villagers. Everyday conversations with non-tribal outsiders revealed perceptions of the Bhil that betray a longstanding and deep-rooted politics of identity harking back to the nation's colonial past. For instance, townspeople often described the Bhil as "dark, unclean and unhygienic, prone to violence and robberies" (Mr. and Mrs. Ahmad, conversation with author, Jhabua, August 4, 2013), displaying a shocking lack of knowledge about and cultural tolerance toward *adivasis* by their neighboring caste communities.

Neighboring caste communities view the Bhil as a community that is closed off to outsiders. Perceived as a violent and hostile group, the Bhil are said to be unwelcoming to non-tribals. Solanki, an elderly male journalist and author who was a longtime resident of Jhabua, stated that "no one has been able to get close to the Bhil," further adding, "that's probably why there isn't much written history about them" (Interview by author, Jhabua, August 10, 2013). However, the fact that he himself has published many articles and a book on the Bhil and my own long-term association with the Bhil are direct contradictions of this perception of the Bhil as closed off to non-Bhil communities. Yet they are portrayed as such by mainstream communities.

The Bhil community's perceived propensity towards violence has been widely documented in the crime rates of Bhil areas (Das 2008). Historical (colonial and otherwise) accounts of *dacaiti* (a violent form of robbery), rebellions,[13] and crime have added to this reputation. According to Das, "Jhabua has the dubious distinction of being the district with the highest crime rate in the state of Madhya Pradesh" (2008: 23). However, what is not reported is that the majority of crimes occur within the community, suggesting that Bhil disputes tend to occur among themselves. Homicide, property disputes, cattle theft, and kidnappings are the most common types of crime. Usually, fatal crimes are not premeditated, rather a result of anger and resentment, and are committed against close relations or

13. See Nilsen 2015 for an excellent account of *adivasi* rebellions in colonial western India and how they took the form of a contentious negotiation between *adivasi*-state relations.

family members. Additionally, the festival months of February to May are when most crimes occur under the influence of liquor (Das 2008). While crime statistics portray Bhil communities as afflicted by high rates of delinquency, the underlying nature or cause of such violence remains unexplored. Nonetheless, Bhil perpetrators have seldom been sentenced to harsh jail terms. Das (2008) finds that such leniency is often justified on the grounds that the Bhil are incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions, a legacy of colonial paternalistic ideas. Subsequently, it is not enough to perpetuate the colonial label of a "criminalized race." Rather, more scholarly analysis is needed to examine how "hands-off" state policies tend to entrench lawlessness.

Another popular perception of the Bhil that I repeatedly came across was that they were not impoverished, but irresponsible with money. Umesh, a 34-year-old, male resident of Rasoli, stated as much during a conversation. He said,

> They [the Bhil] have a lot of money—truckloads of silver jewelry—but would never tell you because then they might not get anything out of you. All the money is because there isn't much day-to-day cost of living. Land is whatever they have inherited, food is from the fields, water is from hand pumps, electricity is free, and they build houses themselves. They are hardworking and make money on labor, but since there is no expenditure except during marriages and festivals, they have a lot of spending capacity. That is the problem. There is no concept of saving or money management, no bank accounts or LIC policies (insurance). We [non-tribals] will earn 500 Rupees and save 400 Rupees, while they will spend all 500. Also, in order to take loans, since most people need the money immediately, they go to money lenders rather than banks who charge them 4 to 7 percent interest per month, which makes the interest amount more than half the borrowed amount in a year. (Umesh, conversation with author, Rasoli, August 2, 2013)

Umesh's positionality as a member of a caste community, working in the development sector in western Madhya Pradesh, helps explain his ideas on Bhil wealth. Umesh hailed from a relatively impoverished background and was employed with an NGO working with the Bhil. Consequently, he had close contact with its community members, which gave him in-depth knowledge of Bhil life. Yet, his statements were riddled with assumptions regarding appropriate behavior for the Bhil. As a male (privileged) member of a caste community, perhaps Umesh could not fathom how a community with so much access to state welfare would not conduct themselves according to the logic of modern society. According to him, and indeed most mainstream views, rational behavior in modern

society entails saving for and investing in the future. Thus, Umesh deems Bhili attitude towards money irresponsible and irrational. Conceivably, his own impoverished background may have led to such beliefs. As a member of a caste community, he may not have had equivalent access to welfare benefits. This resentment is expressed when he commented that "Christian Bhil get a lot of money [from the church]. That is why they convert. They get homes, food, tuition money, and so on" (Umesh, conversation with author, Rasoli, September 21, 2013).

Enshrining the term Scheduled Tribe in the constitution has led to several protective and development policies to help tribal communities assimilate with mainstream caste communities. However, attempts to erase cultural differences under the guise of development have instead resulted in deepening rifts between tribal and non-tribal communities. Violent clashes protesting affirmative action policies (or reservation quota systems) and conflict between communities are evidence of politicized identities. Similar to arguments made in studies on South African and Australian indigenous groups, culture, tradition, and ethnicity have become the fault lines along which identities are dichotomized and hierarchies established (MacLeod and Durrheim 2002; Saethre 2013). Culture has become the new "race," and "othering" the strategy of dominant, mainstream groups. The larger research on which this paper is based also reveals "othering" to be an equalizing tool caused by caste groups' resentment of Scheduled Tribe status. It is a widespread matter of contention among caste communities that Scheduled Tribe groups have more access to coveted government jobs, political positions, and higher education facilities along with access to state welfare projects. Consequently, blaming Bhil culture and traditions as "backward" and "regressive" are strategies of "othering" that serve to maintain dominance over them. These are "neo-imperial" attitudes that force conflict between different cultures by acceptance of one over the other. For instance, the rising rates of *dahej* or brideprice among the Bhil are cited by caste communities as a key reason for persistent Bhil indebtedness, and the Bhil's refusal to do away with this tradition is seen as imprudent. However, it is members of these very communities who contribute to the indebtedness by charging exploitative interest rates for *dahej* loans, but this fact is never mentioned as a cause of impoverishment.

Umesh's was not the only perception of Bhil wastefulness. Other townsfolks also commented on Bhil spending habits, saying that they waste money on luxuries such as cellphones and motorcycles while their children go hungry (Ali, conversation with author, Jhabua, August 4, 2013). Such

opinions mirrored Umesh's view of the Bhil as irresponsible. However, they also betrayed a double standard regarding what kind of modern consumption is considered suitable for *adivasis* by caste communities. While modern luxuries of a certain kind, such as cell phones and motorcycles, are viewed as wasteful, others are deemed appropriate. When I asked the journalist Solanki about the kind of changes he had seen among the Bhil over time, he responded that the biggest difference was in their manner of dressing and that "they cared more about their bodies now," implying changes in hygiene and selfcare. He continued,

> They will wear things like windcheaters for cold, wear gloves while handling cement, they wear shoes now. The old way of wearing the *ghaghra* like a *dhoti*,[14] for women, is dying out. No one makes *mahua* (liquor) at home anymore. *Mahua* can be bought in the market. You won't find the old style and designs on clothes either, such as patterns, textiles, material, etc. (Solanki, interview by author, Jhabua, August 10, 2013)

According to Umesh, such changes were positive in nature, reflective of a "maturing" *adivasi* population; one moving towards adopting modern, mainstream habits. Season-appropriate clothing like windcheaters, protective gear such as gloves, wearing shoes as opposed to open-toed sandals (or worse, going barefoot), are all indicators of consumers who belong in a modern nation. These habits purportedly fulfill the basic necessities of leading a modern life. Bhil women who wear gender-appropriate clothing – such as skirts (*ghaghra*), rather than makeshift pants (*dhoti*) – are believed to fit better into mainstream society. Similarly, buying (traditional) liquor in a market is a sign of modern consumption. These are "desirable" changes among the *adivasi* that signify their willingness to assimilate into modern society, and thus operate within the rules of such a society. However, it is made clear that there is still the need to maintain social hierarchies between mainstream and *adivasi* communities. While the Bhil are welcomed to adapt to certain modern behaviors, they are still considered an impoverished group located "outside" the mainstream. Thus, owning cellphones and motorcycles is disallowed within the limits of modern consumption and frowned upon.

Creation of Debt and Dependency: exploitative relationships

The Bhil have a longstanding, historical relationship with moneylenders or the caste community of *Baniyas*. While this relationship in precolonial

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14. A style of wearing a long skirt (*ghaghra*) and tucking the front and back into the waistband to create a makeshift, billowing pant (*dhoti*).

times was characterized by relatively equitable trade of grain for goods such as salt, iron, and cloth, the colonial era saw the relationship turn exploitative and hierarchical. Colonial administrators expanded the roles of middlemen and traders for revenue collection, instating an association of debt and dependency between the *adivasi* and *Baniya* communities. Postcolonial policies did little to address unequal credit relationships, and agricultural distress compounded the dependence on moneylenders for cash (Hardiman 1996; Mosse 2005; Mosse et al. 2002). Currently *Baniyas* take about 12 to 15 percent interest (*beyaj*) from *adivasis*. This can be compared to 2 percent interest rates from Community Body Organizations such as Self-Help Groups. *Baniyas* are also known to buy seeds before the monsoon season and then sell them at an inflated price. Among the *Baniyas*, small families have become powerful in the locality by owning debt from many *adivasis*. On seeing me with a member of the Bhil community in town, one moneylender bragged, "[A]ll these people here," pointing generically in the direction of Bhil villagers in the Rasoli market, "even the person you were sitting with, all are in my debt" (Nagar, conversation with author, Rasoli, February 25, 2013). Such exploitative relationships often go unquestioned by the Bhil because they are necessary, as large loans from banks require maneuvering around red tape. Townspeople on their part justify exploitative interest rates by saying that they face large risks by lending *adivasis* money, who often default on payments.[15]

A different aspect of *adivasi* dependency was revealed to me during an interview with Sher Singh, a male Bhil farmer in his twenties. Sher Singh had four brothers. They had undergone the traditional *batvara* (division) of their father's field resulting in small land holdings for each of them. The division was done at home among the brothers and their father, without the involvement of the *patwari* — a land record officer at the sub-district level who maintains accounts of ownership of land — because they often expect payoffs.[16] This is a reluctantly accepted reality and another aspect of exploitative relationships that the Bhil have come to know well. The five brothers shared a well in their field which was built under their father's name with joint assistance from an NGO and a government project. Yet, crop yield was barely enough for subsistence for all the families. Sher Singh's household did not manage to sell any crops the previous year because his

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15. This is contrary to what Mosse 2005 has found, saying that the Bhil are rarely known to default on loans because it is a mutual (albeit exploitative) relationship, hence *adivasis* need to maintain the patronage of *Baniyas* to access cash quickly and without bureaucratic obstacles.
16. See Akhil Gupta 1995 for more on discourses of corruption in India.

field was too small for crops beyond subsistence. Therefore, he had to take on additional jobs in the town. His brothers made do with agriculture as they had taken a small amount of land on rent. Additionally, his brothers' children were older and had migrated for manual labor, which also brought in income.

Ideally, Sher Singh and his brothers would have liked to construct another well on their land for better irrigation and increasing crop yield. However, they were one of the many *adivasi* families which slipped through the cracks of development and state policy. According to state policy, if a land holding is too small, then the government cannot contribute funds for a well. Reality is that with continuous *batvara*, land holdings in Bhil villages are becoming smaller and smaller. Furthermore, if a field already has a well under the name of the owner, then a second one will not be funded. Therefore, the brothers faced two problems: first, they could not ask for a well from the government for an undivided field, as it already had one under the father's name; second, if they asked for a well under a different owner, say the eldest brother, then they would have to first prove that the field was divided, and the eldest brother was owner of his own field. To do so, they would have had to go to the *patwari*, which would cost them more money. Ludicrously, if they had the *batvara* made official, then the land holding would become too small, and they would not get their well anyway. Thus, caught in the gaps between state development policy and bureaucratic corruption, Sher Singh and his family had to rely on other sources of income rather than agriculture, further enmeshing them in a cycle of debt and dependency.

Self-representation, Rationality and Resistance

Bhim Singh, a 33-year-old Bhili male, explained the uncritical acceptance of exploitative relationships by saying that "they," *adivasis*, tend to be "less intelligent type of people" (Bhim Singh, interview by author, Kheda village, February 12, 2013). Coming from an *adivasi*, Bhim Singh's statement reveals two things; first, by "less intelligent" he means that *adivasis* do not have the capacity to challenge the status-quo; second, he is reproducing mainstream representations of the Bhil as "irresponsible", "irrational", and "imprudent." However, Bhim Singh did not view himself as part of this perpetuated stereotype. His life history provides an interesting and unusual example of how Bhil identities are becoming increasingly aligned with mainstream Hindu, "modern" communities by learning to negotiate the intersections of power, privilege, and fulfillment of needs.

Being a victim of polio as a child, Bhim Singh lost the use of both legs at a very young age. Yet he has been able to successfully use his education (uncommon but rising among *adivasis* of his age in this region) and disability to negotiate advantages for himself and his family. He navigated state government bureaucracy to obtain a disability card and Below Poverty Line (BPL) card, which give them more access to state benefits, for himself and his wife, also similarly disabled. He volunteered to act as an intermediary for votes during elections, growing a network of political contacts within the local government. As a result, he was also able to get his wife appointed an *aanganwadi*[17] worker, which comes with its own slew of benefits including a starting salary of 20 USD[18] a month, which can go up to 70 USD.[19] Thus, he often represented himself to me as "more mainstream" and different from "other" Bhil. He claimed to engage in what he considered "mainstream" behavior, which he defined as engaging in non-*adivasi* behavior, such as wearing non-Bhili clothes, being close with townspeople, and speaking in Hindi rather than Bhili. In this way, Bhim Singh self-represented as less *adivasi* and more "mainstream" and, therefore, more "modern."

"Rationality": powerlessness or resistance?

The idea of dependency among the Bhil is so pervasive that often rational behavior on their part can be portrayed as indolence by outsiders. For instance, Bhil children are only sent to the *aanganwadi* by parents on days when porridge is distributed, although they are supposed to attend every day from morning till afternoon. Taken at face value, this portrays the Bhil as sending their children only when there are tangible benefits to be obtained. However, according to Veena, a female government nurse I met in Rasoli, "children should get proper food every day, but the *roti* (bread) sometimes is so thin that the younger kids don't bother coming from far away for it" (Interview by author, Kheda village, September 6, 2013). Thus, the underlying motivations for sending children irregularly are quite different from what could be considered mere interest in receiving state benefits. Given the scattered settlement patterns of Bhil villages, huts are spread very far apart, and there is only one *aanganwadi* for each hamlet in Bhil villages. It is therefore irrational to expect young Bhil children to walk to far off *aanganwadis* when they have access to care and better, more nutritious food at home.

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17. The state-funded rural childcare program.
18. Equivalent to 1,500 Rupees.
19. Equivalent to 5,000 Rupees.

In a similar manner of thinking, parents with school-going children receive 5 USD[20] for two school uniforms per student per year, but often buy only one. They receive further 4 USD[21] per year for girl students starting from Class 1 or 6 years of age. As Kumar, the primary school teacher in a Bhil village, said, "Unless they receive these benefits, they will not send their children to school" (Interview by author, Kheda village, September 25, 2013). The implication is that *adivasi* parents need incentives, monetary or otherwise, to send their children (specifically girls) to school. However, given *adivasi* suspicion of modern education and the neo-imperial attitudes of teachers who force *adivasi* children to give up traditional ways in favor of adopting more Hinduized, mainstream behaviors (Vaidya 2018), perhaps the decision not to send children to school is seen as rational by the parents. Additionally, they might consider a more pressing use of older children's time that of assisting with domestic and agricultural chores rather than attending school.[22]

In this sense, the Bhil often exercise both agency and power in choosing which mainstream behaviors suit their realities in practical ways and manage to resist against the perception of them as powerless. On the first Friday of every month, Veena would travel to Bhil villages to administer vaccinations to village children. On the day I met her in the *aanganwadi*, she was angry because the village health worker, titled Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA),[23] had not arrived on time. Veena called the ASHA on her mobile phone repeatedly until she answered and said she would arrive shortly. Meanwhile, Veena threatened to stop the ASHA's payment since the same thing had happened last time. She muttered to herself that she could not "fake the reports every time," implying that she had had to do so on more than one occasion. While waiting for the ASHA, Veena explained, "Earlier I would go house to house to give vaccinations, but now that there is the ASHA system, I cannot move around" (Interview by author, Kheda village, September 6, 2013). The ASHA is paid by the

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20. Equivalent to 400 Rupees.
21. Equivalent to 300 Rupees.
22. The state, for its part, continues to give benefits, such as a bicycle, to students for passing Class 5 and then again Class 8 in the hopes of incentivizing parents to send their children to school.
23. The National Rural Health Mission provides a trained female community health activist, titled Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), to every village in India. The ASHA acts as a liaison between the community and public health system. She must be a young female (between 25 and 45 years), literate, and residing in the village (National Health Mission n.d.).

government to bring children and pregnant women to the nurse. Veena said that she cannot leave the appointed place of vaccination, usually the *aanganwadi*, in case an adhikari (government official from the Health Department) came to check on them. She added, "Else I would have gone from house to house to give the vaccines, because these villagers want this. They want us to go from door to door. I'll be sitting here, and no one will come, but as soon as an *adhikari* comes, they [Bhil] will be the first to complain that no one comes to give pills, vaccines, etc." (Veena, interview by author, Kheda village, September 6, 2013).

Veena's perception of the Bhil as being so dependent on welfare services that they expect door-to-door service perpetuates the stereotype of *adivasis* as lazy and irresponsible. Specifically, mothers who fail to bring their children to the vaccination clinics are viewed as negligent. However, similar to what is observed among Australian indigenous communities, *adivasi* non-compliance to outside "expertise" — whether medical or, as illustrated in this paper, development-related — can be viewed instead "as a tool of contestation by ignoring, critiquing, confronting, or repudiating" instructions from experts (Saethre 2013: 174). Eventually, the ASHA turned up half an hour after she was called, and slowly other women and children began trickling in. Neither did Veena withhold the ASHA's payment nor fire her. Thus, *adivasis* are successfully able to "[transform] their stigmatized identities into a source of power and resistance" (Saethre 2013: 174).

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, three contradictory representations of the Bhil circulate in mainstream discourse. The first one, which the state and dominant caste communities find "desirable," is that of a modern "intelligent" consumer who wants to assimilate with mainstream society and abide by its rules. The second one is a self-representation which aligns with mainstream identities in order to gain access to resources. The third one is a representation of the Bhil as incapable of progress despite all the welfare that is provided to them. The latter includes those who refuse to turn up on time for vaccinations, thus expressing resistance through non-compliance. All three are valid representations of Bhil identity and reality, and are impacted by mainstream perceptions and state policies.

Indian anthropologists have long theorized about tribal transformations as being conceived in terms of assimilation into mainstream (primarily

Hindu) society (Bose 1941; Roy Burman 1970; Vidyarthi and Rai 1977). However, assimilation into mainstream communities is not a simple process of adopting all mainstream behaviors. The Bhil exercise agency and power in choosing which of the behaviors suit their reality, and the adoption of upper-class Hindu values (Hinduization) as a motivation for not being "other" constitues a significant aspect of this choice. While narratives of dependency are rife in the imaginations of non-tribals and the state, they also obscure the ways in which the Bhil are able to transform their perceived powerlessness into engagement with the state. Consequently, the Bhil and other marginalized communities are caught in the midst of identity politics, the outcome of which ultimately determines their socioeconomic present and future.

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