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The bohada mask festival of the tribes of northern maharashtra: Retracing the cultural heritage

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1. Abstract

Traditional tribal festivals have been characterized by a strong sense of expression which has been rooted in their religious and socio-cultural norms. These festivals often incorporate the use of multifaceted art forms in the tangible as well as intangible realms that have a heightened sense of cultural belonging through art expressions. They also delve into the day-to-day being and even at times deliver a statement into their way of life.

Bohada is one such festival which is an appraisal of the rewards given by the bygone monsoon and a commemoration of the one to come by the agrarian tribes of northern Maharashtra. Bohada is a shrine ceremony of the entire village. The festival is a model for the study of the arrangement, dialogue, farcical characters, plot, masks, costumes, music, and the rituals performed during it. This paper explores Bohada, a shrine ceremony celebrated by agrarian tribes in northern Maharashtra, through an in-depth investigation of its social, religious, and artistic dimensions. Employing an exploratory research design, the study conducted field visits to tribal areas and utilized qualitative methods, including interviews and observations, to unravel the intricate layers of this cultural phenomenon.

2. Introduction

The rich cultural heritage of Bohada mask dance-drama includes traditions or living expressions

inherited from the tribal ancestors and passed on to the descendants, which includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe with the knowledge and skills to produce traditional mask crafts. The tribal areas of Maharashtra, while reflecting multiple layers of history, diverse cultures, and varied traditions of the people living within, are under great pressure to adapt to the needs and aspirations of a fast-growing urban population.

Bohada mask dance-drama, with this fast urbanisation, is on the verge of extinction. Contemporary needs and a rapid need for urbanization have pushed this art to its fringes. Even as difficulties arise, there's still a small ray of hope. Communities are working hard to keep their traditions alive. This study looks closely at the Bohada mask dance-drama to understand its unique aspects and the challenges it faces. By figuring out what makes it important and the problems it encounters, we hope to find a way for these traditions to continue in the modern world. We want heritage to be more than just a quiet reminder, it should be a vibrant part of the future for generations to come.

3. Methodology

This research explores the socio-cultural and religious aspects of the Bohada Mask Dance-drama



festival in tribal areas like Janori in Nashik District and neighboring regions such as Virgaon, Akole, and Ahmednagar District in Maharashtra. Data collection involved qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with locals, artisans, performers, and cultural custodians. These interviews aimed to uncover insights into the festival's historical significance, rituals, artistic expressions, and contemporary challenges. Field visits were conducted to observe live performances firsthand, while secondary sources like literature and online resources provided additional context.

4. Significance and Essence of a Bohada mask dance-drama festival

Bohada, just like the tradition of masks in the world, is deeply rooted in tribal culture. It is said to be the original dance art of the *Warli, Bhil, Thakar, Katkari, Konka, and Mahadev Koli* tribes in the western Sahyadri ranges. Tribals wear different masks on every occasion like religious festivals, entertainment programs, customs, and traditions. However, the quantum of mask play that takes place in Bohada is rarely seen on other occasions. Bohada often enacts episodes from epics including the Mahabharata and Ramayana, local folklore, and abstract themes. (Chavan, 2014, #)

4.1. Etymology

In Maharashtra, among tribal villages of Thane, Nashik, and Khandesh it is known as *Bahuda* or *Bohada*, while in Marathwada and Vidarbha it is called *Akhadi*. In the tribal languages of Northern Maharashtra *Bahud* means *Bahuman* (□) which is honor and therefore, *Bahuda* is a ceremonial expression intended to pay homage to the masks, including those representing deities, animals, and other characters endowed with divine power. At this time, a procession of gods and goddesses is taken out from the village called Bhovanda. Bhwanda – Bhwada – Bhwada – Bohada. (Chavan, 2014, #) It is also known as Swang (meaning “imitation”) or Svang (□) (□, 2019)

4.2. Sacred Spaces and Festive Grounds

Bohada is a festival celebrated by tribes in the districts of Thane, Nasik, and Ahmednagar. In Thane district, the festival takes place in eight different villages: Mokhada Bohada, Kardan Bohada (on Gudi Padva), *Bharsat* meth Bohada (on Akshaya Tritiya), Denga chi meth Bohada, Vehel pada Bohada in Taluka Vikramgad, Jawhar Bohada (on Ram Navami), Poyshet Bohada, and Kokada Bohada. (Saxena, 2017) In Nashik District, the festival is celebrated in Janori, while in Ahmednagar District, Bohada is organized in villages across Akole taluka, including Virgaon (on Gudi Padva), Udadawane, Mutkhel, Panjare, Lingdeo, Lavhali, Chichondi, Shinganwadi, and Ghatghar.

4.3. Ecological Significance

In most tribal villages, a week before the Bohada festival, community members cultivate rice in petite baskets. Within three days, these seedlings reach a height of 6-7 inches and are then presented as an offering to Gaon Devi. Concurrently, in some locations, a ritual known as ‘*Gaurai Puja*’ takes place, involving the offering of twelve varieties of grains, including ragi, varai, moong, udid, tur, and sesame. This ceremony serves as a means to test the germination potential of the grains, guiding the formulation of crop plans for the upcoming year based on the results.

5. Preparatory Measures

The Bohada festival commences on Holi and extends until Akshaya Tritiya, spanning the Marathi months of Chaitra and Vaishakh. Bohada festival, with varying durations. The celebration may span three, five, or even seven days in some instances.

In Akole taluka, the festival extends over two days. The first day marks the observance of *Chhota/Dhakata* (Small) Bohada, coinciding with Gudi Padva, while the second day is dedicated to *Motha/Thorala*



(Big) Bohda. In the village of Virgaon Lingdev, located in Akole taluka, a distinctive practice involves conducting an auction for the roles of mask characters, exclusively open to the village residents. The proceeds generated from this auction are utilized for community welfare initiatives and the development of public utility projects. Preceding the Bohada festival, a *Jagran* is performed over two days. For the festival itself, a designated area is prepared in the center of the village or the temple courtyard, where a ground is laid out with lime, and a cloth mandap (chandani) is erected. (Gole, 2014, #)

Historically, the emphasis on costumes during Bohada was minimal, with characters primarily wearing masks while enacting their roles with few clothes on the body. However, in contemporary times, financial assistance from politicians has facilitated the procurement of costume materials. Local craftsmen now create vibrant and elaborate costumes, including special sparkling attire for the masked characters. Additionally, weapons such as maces, swords, spears, bows, and arrows are crafted. (Chavan, 2014, #)

Kerosene lanterns contribute to the dramatic ambiance of the festival. These lanterns are made



Kerosene Lanterns (Source: Dr.Govind Gare, Akole, Accessed via <https://www.akolemaza.com>)

by wrapping a rag of cloth around the tip of a tree branch, which is then dipped in kerosene.

6. The Artistry and Symbolism of Bohada Masks

Out of the 47 tribes only 8-10 tribes namely Koknas, Warlis, Bhils, Madias, Thakars, Mahadev Kolis, Dhor Kolis & Malhar Kolis, Katkaris, and Korkus are known for making masks. (Tribhuwan & Savelli, 2003, #) Traditionally, for wooden masks the wood of the Cluster Fig tree and Pangara tree (*Erythrina variegata*) which is light in weight and lends itself easily to carving any shape, is generally preferred. But they also make use of wood from the Saag tree (*Tectona grandis*), although very rarely as this wood is heavy, and not that conducive to carving. (Tribhuwan & Savelli, 2003, #)

Due to the challenges associated with crafting and polishing wooden masks, as well as their

weightiness, these masks have been replaced by more manageable paper mache masks in Bohada celebrations.

In certain regions, alternative materials such as clay, bamboo, leather, and metal are also utilized for mask preparation. (Vikaspedia, 2020) These tribal masks embody diverse representations, symbolizing deities, cosmic beings, demons, royalty, animals, spirits, totems, and more.

Within tribal cultures, these mythological characters hold significant meaning.

The mask traditions vary between tribes living in the plains and those in remote areas. For instance, the Bhil tribe residing in the valleys of the Satpuda mountain ranges engage in '*Shikari*' or hunting dances featuring masks representing wild animals and jungle spirits.



7. The Procession :



(Image Source : Dr.Govind Gare, Akole, Accessed via <https://www.akolemaza.com/-adivasi-nrutya>)

Bohada begins with a deity procession, called 'Mohati,' after seeking blessings from the village deity. The hand's imprint, dipped in color, along with the paw, is made on the temple wall. The festival's stage is the open space in front of the Goddess's temple, where drama unfolds with 25 to 30 artists participating.

On the first day, masked characters representing Lord Ganesha chant for good rains, followed by Sarjadevi, symbolizing Saraswati. The second day

features various characters like Moon-Sun, Khanderao, Vishnu, and others. Each character has distinct characteristics, changing dance styles with the tune of instruments. Scenes depict battles like Ram-Ravan, Vali-Sugriva, and Bhima-Bakasura (Gole, 2014, #)

On the third day, at sunrise, the goddess, seated on a tiger, is portrayed, sometimes depicted slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura.

8. Socio-Cultural and Economic Impact :



Preparation of the Procession (Image Source:<https://m.facebook.com/bohadaTribalMaskFestival/>)

Bohada unites people from diverse backgrounds, including Brahmins, tailors, goldsmiths, Telis, and Vanjaris, who have participated for over a century. They now join the tribal community in portraying

masked characters. Notably, individuals like Kasara, a Muslim, actively contribute, highlighting Bohada's inclusive spirit. For instance, Kasara holds



the honor of presenting *chuda* (a set of bangles) to the goddess. (Gole, 2014, #)

The *Panchkroshi* (a cluster of villages within five or six miles) residents revel in the festivities

throughout the night. In recent years, Bohada's reputation has transcended Maharashtra, attracting fans from across the country. This growing popularity suggests the potential for Bohada to become a



Image source: Ajit Mauke

Traditional musical instrument (Source:<https://thinkmaharashtra.com/>, □ □ □ □)

(<https://www.youtube.com/@ajitmaule9723>)



Wooden Masks (Image Source Mr.Gare. Akole, Accessed via <https://www.akolemaza.com/-adivasi-nrutya>)

significant source of financial turnover if organised more efficiently.

In conclusion, Bohada enriches social capital by inspiring active participation, reducing inequalities, fostering inclusion, and promoting cultural engagement. It also encourages intergenerational dialogue and enhances social cohesion while nurturing skills and creativity through its mask-dance celebration.

9. Recommendations

In Thane and Nasik Districts, only a few mask makers work to preserve the Bohada tradition amidst a large tribal population in Maharashtra. To sustain this heritage, promoting local institutions for mask-making and traditional markets can provide platforms for artisans. With global interest in handmade crafts, promoting traditional crafts can offer an alternative to high-tech consumer culture.



Legal measures, including intellectual property protections, are essential to safeguard communities' rights and preserve their cultural heritage while benefiting their economic well-being.

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