

A Comparative Study of Pre- and Post-Migration Patterns among Bhil Migrants in Bhopal, India

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Abstract

Urban migration among indigenous populations in India is frequently examined through structural lenses of economic marginalization and displacement. Far less attention has been devoted to systematic examination of how migration reorders everyday cultural practices. This paper presents a comparative domain-based analysis of pre- and post-migration cultural patterns among Bhil migrants residing in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Drawing on survey data collected from 100 respondents, the study evaluates transformations across ritual participation, linguistic practices, dress norms, social networks, and identity articulation. Findings demonstrate that cultural change under urban transition is neither linear nor uniform. Public and institutional domains show marked adaptive shifts, while domestic and ritual spaces exhibit significant continuity. The results challenge homogenizing narratives of tribal assimilation and instead highlight selective, structurally mediated cultural reconfiguration. The study contributes to migration sociology and indigenous urban studies by operationalizing domain-specific comparative measurement within a South Asian context.

Keywords: Indigenous migration, Bhil tribe, Urban transition, Cultural reconfiguration, Acculturation, Internal migration, Domain-specific adaptation

1. Introduction

Migration has historically been theorized either as a force of assimilation or as a site of structural marginalization. Within the Indian context, scholarship on tribal mobility has predominantly emphasized dispossession, displacement due to development projects, and incorporation into precarious urban labor markets. While such frameworks illuminate critical political-economic dynamics, they insufficiently account for the restructuring of everyday cultural life following relocation.

Indigenous communities do not migrate as economically neutral actors; they carry systems of meaning, ritual frameworks, linguistic traditions, and kinship-based social organization. Urban relocation exposes these systems to new institutional environments characterized by bureaucratic regulation, time discipline, market integration, and heterogeneous interaction networks. Such environments may generate pressures toward adaptation, but adaptation does not automatically entail cultural erasure.

Despite the size of the Bhil population—one of India’s largest Scheduled Tribe groups, systematic empirical comparison of their pre-migration and post-migration cultural patterns remains limited. Existing literature tends to either romanticize cultural preservation or predict cultural dissolution without domain-specific measurement.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a structured comparative analysis of pre- and post-migration practices across five cultural domains. Rather than asking whether culture is “lost” in the city, the study asks:

- Which cultural domains exhibit continuity?
- Which domains demonstrate transformation?
- Are changes uniform across generational and occupational categories?
- How does urban structure shape cultural reorganization?

By reframing migration as a process of domain-specific cultural reconfiguration, the paper contributes to a more analytically precise understanding of indigenous urban transition.

Literature review is as follows: -

Dolla et al. (2017) examined the health and morbidity status of the Bharia tribe across ten villages in Madhya Pradesh. Their study identified high rates of illiteracy, widespread respiratory infections, recurrent fevers, and malnutrition, particularly among children. The research highlights the urgent need for targeted healthcare services and educational interventions for vulnerable tribal populations.

Mukherjee (2017) discussed the contributions of anthropology in Central India and critiqued bureaucratic constraints that limit effective research engagement in Madhya Pradesh. The study emphasized the importance of region-specific anthropological inquiry focused on tribal communities such as the Bhils. It underlined the relevance of applied anthropology in addressing socio-cultural and economic challenges within tribal societies.

Baviskar (2004) analyzed tribal displacement resulting from development projects in Central India. The study demonstrated that spatial relocation reshapes ritual organization and community structures rather than completely dissolving them. The findings provide important context for understanding cultural restructuring among tribal migrants.

Hasnain (2001) documented the socio-cultural organization of major tribal groups in India, including the Bhils. The study highlighted kinship cohesion, ritual practices, and linguistic continuity in rural settings, but provided limited discussion on urban transformation processes.

Xaxa (2005) examined issues of language, religion, and identity among tribal communities in India. The study argued that tribal identity persists despite institutional pressures and integration into broader state systems. It emphasized political and structural dimensions of tribal identity negotiation.

Rath (2006) focused on tribal development policies in India and their socio-economic implications. While addressing structural marginalization, the study did not systematically analyze everyday cultural adaptation following migration.

Roy Burman (1994) reflected on tribal development and argued that cultural identity often persists symbolically despite shifts in occupation and settlement patterns. The study suggested resilience of identity markers under changing socio-economic conditions.

Berry (1997) proposed a bidimensional framework of acculturation, distinguishing between cultural maintenance and cultural adoption. The model identified integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization as possible adaptation strategies.

Portes and Zhou (1993) introduced the theory of segmented assimilation, arguing that migrant incorporation varies depending on structural contexts such as labor market access and social capital availability.

Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) conceptualized acculturation as cultural change resulting from sustained intergroup contact, laying the theoretical foundation for studies on migration-induced transformation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 From Assimilation to Multidimensional Adaptation

Classical assimilation theory conceptualized migration as gradual convergence toward dominant cultural norms. Later theoretical developments rejected unilinear assumptions, emphasizing that migrants may simultaneously retain origin practices while adopting host-society behaviors. The bidimensional acculturation framework proposes that cultural retention and cultural adoption operate independently rather than as opposing ends of a continuum.

Segmented assimilation theory further suggests that adaptation pathways are shaped by structural incorporation contexts, including labor market positioning and social stratification.

However, these frameworks require refinement when applied to indigenous internal migration within postcolonial nation-states. Unlike transnational migrants, indigenous internal migrants relocate within the same national polity but across radically different socio-economic and institutional environments.

2.2 Domain Differentiation: Public vs. Private Cultural Space

Urban sociology introduces an important analytic distinction: public institutional domains (workplaces, markets, state institutions) and private or communal domains (household, ritual space, kin networks). Institutional domains demand conformity to dominant linguistic and behavioral norms. Domestic domains offer relative autonomy for cultural continuity.

This distinction allows migration-induced change to be analyzed as domain differentiation rather than aggregate transformation.

2.3 Indigenous Identity under Urban Pressure

Identity is not synonymous with observable practice. Symbolic ethnic identification may remain stable even when certain behavioral markers shift. Urban contexts may reshape modes of expression without eliminating identification.

The theoretical proposition guiding this study is therefore:

Cultural transformation among Bhil migrants is domain-specific and structurally mediated rather than uniformly assimilative.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a quantitative comparative research design embedded within an exploratory confirmatory framework. It compares recalled pre-migration patterns with current practices across structured domains.

3.2 Sample and Field Site

The research was conducted in Bhopal, a rapidly expanding urban center in central India. A total of 100 Bhil migrants were surveyed across multiple neighborhoods exhibiting varying degrees of socio-economic integration.

Respondents were distributed across:

- Age groups
- Duration of residence
- Occupational categories
- Educational levels

This distribution allows domain-specific analysis across social variables.

3.3 Operationalization of Domains

Five comparative domains were operationalized:

1. Ritual and festival participation
2. Primary language of daily communication
3. Dress practices
4. Social interaction patterns
5. Identity articulation

For each domain, respondents were asked to indicate patterns prior to migration and current patterns.

Composite indicators were constructed to categorize change intensity (low, moderate, high).

3.4 Analytical Strategy

- Descriptive statistics mapped distribution patterns
- Cross-tabulations assessed variation across age and duration
- Chi-square tests evaluated association significance
- Domain comparison identified differentiated transformation

This strategy avoids overgeneralization while maintaining analytical rigor.

4. Findings

4.1 Ritual Domain: Resilient but Compressed

Pre-migration ritual participation was characterized by collective, community-wide engagement embedded in agrarian cycles and extended kinship networks. Post-migration participation remains substantial; however, scale and frequency display moderate contraction. Urban constraints particularly work schedules and spatial dispersion—limit communal gatherings. Nonetheless, 72% of respondents report continued celebration of major Bhil rituals within domestic or localized community settings.

Thus, ritual continuity persists, but its collective intensity is reduced and spatially reorganized.

4.2 Linguistic Domain: Functional Bilingualism

Before migration, Bhili dialects predominated across all interaction contexts. In Bhopal, Hindi becomes the dominant language in public, occupational, and institutional contexts. However, 83% of respondents report continued use of Bhili within household settings. This bifurcation reflects functional bilingualism rather than linguistic assimilation. Urban incorporation necessitates Hindi fluency; domestic interaction sustains linguistic continuity.

4.3 Dress Practices: Generational Divergence

Traditional attire was near universal prior to migration. Post-migration patterns reveal clear generational differentiation. Younger migrants, particularly those in formal employment or educational institutions, report increased adoption of urban dress norms.

However, traditional attire retains symbolic importance during rituals and ceremonies. Dress adaptation is therefore contextual rather than identity-substituting.

4.4 Social Networks: Expansion without Dissolution

Village social organization was kinship-dense. Migration expands networks to include employers, neighbors, co-workers, and diverse social actors. Nevertheless, intra-community networks remain strong due to neighborhood clustering.

Urban transition produces network diversification rather than fragmentation.

4.5 Identity Articulation: Symbolic Stability

Despite behavioral adaptations, self-identification as Bhil remains high across all demographic categories. Only 11% of respondents report hesitation in expressing tribal identity publicly.

Identity, therefore, exhibits greater resilience than certain visible practices.

5. Discussion

The findings affirm the central proposition: cultural change among Bhil migrants is domain-specific. Institutional environments demand adaptive shifts, particularly in language and dress. Domestic and ritual domains preserve continuity.

This domain bifurcation demonstrates that migration does not automatically entail assimilation. Rather, structural pressures shape public behaviors, while symbolic and communal practices remain stable.

The results complicate deterministic models of cultural erosion and suggest a need to reconceptualize indigenous urban migration as negotiated reconfiguration.

6. Contribution to Scholarship

This study contributes in three ways:

1. It introduces structured pre–post domain comparison within indigenous migration research.
2. It operationalizes domain differentiation in empirical measurement.

3. It provides Indian urban tribal data within broader theoretical debates on adaptation and identity.

7. Conclusion

Urban transition among Bhil migrants in Bhopal does not generate uniform cultural transformation. Instead, it produces differentiated reorganization shaped by institutional demands and communal resilience.

Understanding migration through domain-specific analysis enables more precise evaluation of cultural change beyond binary narratives.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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