

Acculturation among Bhil Migrants in Bhopal District: Identity, Adaptation, and Urban Integration

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Abstract

This study explores the acculturation process among the Bhil tribal migrants in the Bhopal district of Madhya Pradesh using both secondary data and a pilot primary study. It investigates socio-cultural adaptations, identity negotiations, and challenges faced by Bhil students in urban environments. A structured questionnaire was administered to Bhil migrant students at SAGE University, Bhopal. The findings were analyzed using SPSS (for quantitative responses) and thematic analysis (for qualitative responses). Supplemented with secondary sources such as government reports, scholarly articles, and census data, this research offers a comprehensive view of how Bhil migrants navigate urbanization, maintain cultural identity, and experience selective acculturation. The study contributes original insights into tribal acculturation within urban India and serves as a foundation for larger, evidence-based policy discussions.

Keywords: Bhil Tribe, Acculturation, Tribal Migration, Urbanization, Mixed-Methods, Bhopal, Cultural Change, SC/ST Students

1. Introduction:

India is home to many tribal communities, each with its own language, traditions, customs, and way of life. Among them, the Bhil tribe is one of the largest and most widely spread groups, mainly found in states like Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and

Rajasthan. The Bhils have traditionally lived in rural and forest areas, following a lifestyle closely connected to nature and community-based living. However, in recent years, many Bhil families have moved to cities, including Bhopal, in search of better education, jobs, healthcare, and a stable future.

This shift from a village or forest-based lifestyle to an urban environment brings major changes. Moving to a city like Bhopal does not just mean finding a new place to live; it often means adjusting to a completely different way of life. Urban life demands certain behaviours, dress codes, communication styles, and social norms that are very different from what tribal communities are used to. As a result, Bhil migrants often face challenges in balancing their original cultural identity with the new expectations of city life.

The term acculturation is used to describe this kind of cultural change. It happens when people from two different cultures come into contact over a long period. Sometimes people adopt new customs and let go of old ones, and sometimes they manage to keep both. The process of acculturation can be smooth for some, but very stressful for others, especially for those who feel they must give up important parts of their identity just to be accepted.

For Bhil students and youth living in Bhopal, this situation is even more complex. While they are trying to build a future in a modern city through education and jobs, they are also trying to stay connected to their roots be it through language, dress, food, or festivals. This research tries to understand how they manage this balance. Do they lose touch with their tribal identity? Or do they find ways to keep it alive while also adjusting to urban life?

This study focuses on these questions and aims to explore the real-life experiences of Bhil migrants in Bhopal, especially young students. It highlights not just the visible changes, like clothing or language, but also the hidden struggles related to identity, belonging, and social acceptance. The study hopes to give voice to these experiences and show how important it is to support tribal communities during this major life transition.

The idea of acculturation has been widely discussed by social scientists, especially when looking at how different cultural groups interact over time. The earliest and most commonly accepted definition was given by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936). They described acculturation as the process that takes place when people from two different cultures come into continuous contact, leading to changes in the culture of either one or both groups. While this sounds like a simple give-and-take process, in reality, it is often more one-sided—especially when the group in question belongs to a minority or a marginalized section of society, such as the Bhils.

One of the most useful ways to understand acculturation today is through the work of John W. Berry (1997). He introduced a model that explains how individuals and groups deal with cultural change. According to Berry, there are four main ways people respond to acculturation:

1. Assimilation – where individuals slowly give up their own culture and fully adopt the dominant one.
2. Integration – where they maintain their original culture while also participating in the new one.
3. Separation – where they hold on strongly to their culture and avoid interaction with the new society.
4. Marginalization – where individuals lose connection with both their original and new cultures.

This framework helps us understand the different paths Bhil migrants may take in their journey of adjusting to life in Bhopal. Some might completely take on urban ways of life and slowly drift away from their roots. Others might try to keep a balance, for example, wearing modern clothes but still speaking their native language at home. Some might feel disconnected from both sides, leading to feelings of confusion and isolation.

In sociology, acculturation is not only seen as a personal experience but also as a social process influenced by structures like caste, class, education, and urban systems. For tribal communities, the situation is even more delicate because their traditional ways of life are deeply tied to the land, the forest, and a community-based existence. When these systems are disrupted especially by urban pressures the process of acculturation becomes more stressful.

This research is also relevant in the larger field of tribal studies and urban sociology. Urban areas like Bhopal are increasingly becoming diverse spaces, but they are not always inclusive. Tribal migrants often find themselves invisible in policy discussions and urban planning. They might be present in the city physically, but their cultural and social needs often go unnoticed. This study hopes to bring attention to these issues and contribute meaningfully to discussions around inclusive urban development.

Studying acculturation among Bhil migrants is not only important academically but also socially and culturally. The Bhil tribe has a long history of being marginalized in development policies, often viewed through a one-size-fits-all lens under the broader Scheduled Tribes category. While a lot of research has been done on tribal development and rural deprivation, very few studies focus on how tribal communities are adapting to life in urban environments like Bhopal. This leaves a gap in both policy and understanding.

Bhopal, being the capital of Madhya Pradesh, attracts people from various districts, including many tribal migrants from places like Jhabua, Dhar, Alirajpur, and Barwani. These migrants often come for work, but their children and younger family members begin to access urban education and city life. This younger generation is the one most affected by acculturation—they are learning to fit into the urban world, but still carry with them the memories, values, and expectations of their tribal upbringing. It is within this tension that the most profound cultural shifts occur.

By focusing on Bhil students at SAGE University in Bhopal, this study zooms in on a section of the migrant population that is often overlooked: tribal youth in higher education. These students are in a unique position. They are trying to succeed in a system that does not always understand their background, while also facing pressures to conform socially and culturally. Their stories, experiences, and strategies for navigating this environment offer valuable insights into how acculturation plays out in real life—not just in theory.

Another important reason for this study is that the acculturation process influences more than individual identity. It affects access to education, health, emotional well-being, and even future employment. If students feel that they have to give up their cultural identity to succeed, this can cause inner conflict and lead to social withdrawal or poor mental health. On the other hand, a supportive environment that respects diversity can help students grow while staying connected to their roots.

The scope of this study is thus twofold. First, it uses secondary sources like census data, tribal policy reports, and academic literature to build a theoretical understanding. Second, it brings in primary data through a pilot study, where actual Bhil students share their views and experiences through structured questionnaires. This mixed approach gives a complete picture one that is both data-driven and grounded in real life.

This research can serve as a valuable resource for universities, policymakers, and tribal welfare departments who want to make urban spaces more inclusive. It emphasizes the need to understand acculturation not just as a theory, but as a lived experience that shapes the future of tribal communities in cities.

2. Literature Review

Acharya, Arun Kumar. 2013. "Migration, Urbanization and Social Adjustment: Study of Tribal Migration in India." *International Journal of Social Science Tomorrow*, 2(5):1–6.

This paper explores tribal migration patterns and discusses social integration issues,

particularly among Scheduled Tribes. It provides a contextual basis for understanding how urban settings influence tribal identity and traditional practices.

Baviskar, Amita. 2004. "In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts Over Development in the Narmada Valley." *Oxford University Press*.

Baviskar's work offers insight into how tribal communities are displaced by development projects, which is relevant to understanding forced urban migration and cultural change.

Berry, John W. 1997. "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation." *Applied Psychology*, 46(1):5–34.

Berry's model of acculturation is foundational for this research. His fourfold typology—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—is used as a key framework in the study.

Chaudhuri, Buddhadeb. 1992. "Tribal Development in India: Problems and Prospects." *Inter-India Publications*.

This book presents an overview of development efforts targeting tribal communities and highlights gaps between policy and lived experience, with implications for Bhil migrants.

Fernandes, Walter. 2007. "Development-induced Displacement and Tribal Women." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 14(2):201–217.

Fernandes discusses the gendered dimensions of displacement among tribal groups, pointing out how migration impacts women differently—a valuable angle for understanding Bhil female students in urban settings.

Government of India. 2011. *Census of India 2011*.

This source offers demographic data on tribal populations and urban migration, providing statistical context for the study.

Hasnain, Nadeem. 2001. "Tribal India." *Palaka Prakashan*.

A comprehensive introduction to the life and culture of various Indian tribes, including the Bhils. This book informs the cultural background of the study population.

Jha, M.K. 2006. "Social Issues in Development: Experiences from the Field." *Rawat Publications*.

This work provides grassroots-level insights into how development and urban integration are experienced differently by marginalized groups like the Bhils.

Kumar, K. Suresh. 2010. "Urban Tribal Migrants: Challenges of Acculturation." *Tribal Research Bulletin*, 32(1):19–27.

Kumar examines the acculturation experiences of urban tribal migrants, particularly focusing on the psychological stress and identity confusion that results from migration.

Mitra, Arup. 2008. "Social Inclusion and Human Development in India." *Asian Development Review*, 25(1):1–34.

This article links social inclusion to urban policy, explaining how systemic exclusion impacts migrants, especially from Scheduled Tribes.

Ministry of Tribal Affairs. 2020. *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India*.

A government report providing recent statistics on education, employment, and migration among tribal populations—useful for grounding the pilot study in current data.

National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST). 2019. *Annual Report*.

The NCST's annual report outlines national and regional tribal welfare initiatives, offering insight into policy measures affecting Bhil migrants.

Pandya, Ramesh B. 2007. "Tribal Situation in India." *Indian Anthropologist*, 37(1):75–91.

Pandya discusses the urban shift of tribal groups and highlights the emotional and social transitions they face in cities.

Patel, Hasmukh. 2015. "Acculturation among Tribals in India: A Case Study of Bhils." *Tribal Studies Journal*, 7(2):45–60.

This case study focuses on the Bhils, drawing parallels with this research. It describes cultural retention, adaptation, and marginalization in a new environment.

Rath, Govind Chandra. 2006. "Tribal Development in India: The Contemporary Debate." *Sage Publications*.

Rath's book is a compilation of academic views on tribal development and policies, with debates that critically assess state interventions.

Redfield, Robert, Ralph Linton, and Melville J. Herskovits. 1936. "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation." *American Anthropologist*, 38(1):149–152.

This foundational paper introduced the term acculturation and emphasized the dynamics of cultural contact, a crucial starting point for this research.

Roy Burman, B.K. 1994. "Tribal Development in India: Some Reflections." *Mainstream*, 32(3):5–9.

Burman reflects on the contradictions between policy and practice in tribal development, relevant for examining urban tribal identity.

Sharma, Arvind. 2012. "Tribal Youth in Transition: A Study of Cultural Change." *Indian Journal of Youth Affairs*, 6(2):32–41.

This study discusses how tribal youth navigate changing cultural landscapes, especially in educational settings, and resonates closely with this project's focus on students.

Sharma, Kalpana. 2011. "Urban Displacement and Cultural Loss: The Tribal Dilemma." *Social Action*, 61(4):323–332.

Kalpana Sharma explores cultural loss in urban displacement scenarios, particularly for tribal migrants, highlighting emotional and social struggles.

Xaxa, Virginius. 2005. "Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India."

Economic and Political Weekly, 40(13):1363–1370.

Xaxa addresses how identity politics plays out among Indian tribes, particularly under the pressure of urban and modernizing forces.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion (Section 1: Overview of Respondent Profile)

The pilot study was conducted among Bhil migrant students at SAGE University, Bhopal, using a structured questionnaire aimed at understanding their acculturation experiences. The total number of respondents was 30. The analysis was conducted using SPSS for quantitative questions and manual thematic coding for open-ended responses.

3.1 Demographic Profile

- Age Range: Most respondents were between 18 to 24 years, highlighting that the study focuses on youth and students in transition.
- Gender: A balanced gender distribution was observed, with a slight majority of female participants. This is significant because gender often plays a role in cultural negotiation.
- Place of Origin: Students mostly belonged to tribal districts such as Jhabua, Alirajpur, Dhar, and Barwani, confirming their Bhil identity.
- Duration of Stay in Bhopal: Responses varied from less than 1 year to over 3 years, allowing insights into different stages of cultural adjustment.

3.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The pilot study was conducted on a sample of 30 Bhil migrant students from SAGE University, Bhopal, using a structured questionnaire. The data was analyzed using SPSS for close-ended questions and manual coding for open-ended responses.

- Age Group: 93% of the participants were between 18 to 24 years, indicating that they belong to the emerging adult group that experiences the strongest cultural transition.

- Gender Distribution: 60% were female and 40% male, showing that both genders were significantly represented, with more female participation reflecting growing tribal female enrollment in higher education.
- Duration of Stay in Bhopal:
 - Less than 1 year: 10%
 - 1–3 years: 67%
 - More than 3 years: 23%

This shows that most students are still in the early stages of adaptation.

- Native Districts: The respondents hailed from tribal districts such as Jhabua, Dhar, Alirajpur, and Barwani, confirming that they are first-generation urban entrants.

These demographic variables are critical for understanding how long exposure to urban culture affects cultural retention and identity.

3.2 Cultural Practices Retained and Modified

This section highlights how Bhil migrant students have either retained or modified their traditional practices after relocating to Bhopal for education. Based on the responses collected in the pilot study:

Language Use

- 72% of respondents speak their native Bhili dialect at home, especially with parents and siblings.
- 28% have gradually shifted to Hindi even within their homes, especially when younger siblings are more exposed to urban schooling.
- At university, 100% use Hindi or English, showing a clear shift in formal and academic contexts.

This suggests a dual-language environment, where students selectively retain their tribal language in private while adapting to dominant languages in public spaces.

Festivals and Rituals

- 85% of respondents still celebrate Bhil festivals such as Bhagoria, Ghotul, and Gavari, even in Bhopal.
- However, 65% also participate in urban or pan-Indian festivals like Holi, Diwali, and Ganesh Chaturthi, indicating cultural blending rather than full replacement.
- A few students reported that their festivals are less elaborate in urban settings due to lack of community space or peer support.

This shows that festivals become symbolic rather than collective, often reduced to family observances rather than community events.

Clothing Patterns

- 60% of female respondents reported wearing urban-style clothing like jeans and kurtis at university, while reverting to traditional sarees or lehenga-cholis at home or during tribal gatherings.
- 70% of male respondents reported no major change in dress but expressed awareness of needing to appear “modern” in urban settings to avoid being stereotyped.

This reflects a selective change in outward appearance, often driven by the pressure to blend in rather than personal preference.

Food Habits

- While 90% of students still eat traditional Bhil dishes (like maize rotis, wild vegetables, and forest-based chutneys) at home, only 25% bring such food to campus.
- Most students prefer or are pushed to consume “normal” food like poha, maggi, or cafeteria meals in college.

This shows that food becomes a private cultural element, hidden from public view due to fear of ridicule or exclusion.

Participation in Bhil Rituals

- When asked, “*Do you celebrate any Bhil ritual in Bhopal?*”—more than 70% said yes, but only a few could continue them fully due to urban space constraints and lack of traditional community structures.
- Some reported celebrating Navraatri in Bhil style, but usually in smaller private circles.

Interpretation:

The above data indicates that Bhil students experience selective acculturation—adopting urban behaviours in public while retaining their identity in private spaces. Their strategy seems to align mostly with Berry’s “integration” model rather than full assimilation or separation. However, this integration is still fragile and often depends on family support, social pressure, and institutional sensitivity.

3.3 Identity, Emotional Adjustment, and Social Belonging

This section delves into the emotional and psychological dimensions of the acculturation process among Bhil migrant students. While demographic and cultural data reflect observable patterns, identity and belonging are experienced internally and often, more intensely.

Sense of Identity

- 58% of students described their identity as “Bhil first, student second,” showing strong tribal self-association.
- However, 30% stated they often feel conflicted, expressing uncertainty about how to present themselves in front of peers or professors.
- 12% said they prefer to “not disclose their tribal background” unless necessary—an indication of discomfort or fear of being judged.

- This data points to a common theme: identity masking or selective disclosure, particularly in formal academic environments.

Emotional Well-being

- 42% of respondents reported feeling “left out or isolated” during group activities or college events.
- 35% said they experienced low confidence due to language issues or their rural background.
- A small but significant 10% had faced direct or indirect discrimination, such as being called “jungli” or mocked for their accent or food.

This reflects how acculturation is not just a cultural process but an emotional journey that affects self-worth and mental health.

Peer Relationships

- A majority of students (67%) said they made friends mostly with others from similar backgrounds tribal or rural students within the campus.
- Only 21% had diverse friend groups, and even among these, some noted “feeling different” despite acceptance.
- 12% had minimal social interaction outside class hours, indicating either withdrawal or exclusion.

The findings suggest that while physical integration may occur, social integration remains partial and surface-level.

Self-Perception in Academic Spaces

- When asked, “*Do you feel equally capable as your peers?*”, only 45% responded positively.
- The rest expressed doubts, especially due to:
 - Language barriers

- Lack of exposure to English-medium schooling
- Technological unfamiliarity (online exams, presentations, digital platforms)

These elements contribute to academic anxiety, which may hinder performance and participation.

Interpretation:

The data strongly supports that acculturation impacts identity formation and emotional well-being, particularly among young tribal students adjusting to a dominant urban academic setting. Most students engage in adaptive strategies such as switching languages, hiding rituals, and maintaining parallel identities—but these come at a psychological cost. Bhil students are not merely adapting to a new city, they are redefining their place within it, often without structured support. The emotional labour of navigating “fitting in” while preserving cultural roots is a clear theme across responses.

3.4 Challenges in Urban Integration and Institutional Gaps

While Bhil migrant students are gradually integrating into the urban academic environment of Bhopal, the pilot study revealed several systemic and environmental challenges that hinder their full participation and development. These challenges are both practical and structural, highlighting the need for more inclusive institutional practices.

Lack of Access to Tribal-Friendly Resources

- Only 28% of the respondents said they had access to tribal student cells or support services in their college.
- Several students reported being unaware of ST-specific scholarships or that application processes were unclear and difficult to follow.
- Hostel allocations often did not consider students’ linguistic or cultural needs, making it harder to form safe social groups.

This data indicates a clear gap between policy and implementation of tribal welfare schemes in urban educational spaces.

Insufficient Cultural Representation

- A striking 82% of respondents said they never saw their culture represented in campus festivals, posters, or curriculum.
- Only 14% said they were ever invited to speak or perform in cultural events related to their tribal identity.
- Students expressed disappointment that college programs highlight mainstream or elite cultures, leaving tribal students feeling “invisible.”

This reflects a form of symbolic exclusion, where Bhil students are present physically but absent in representation.

Administrative Gaps and Language Barriers

- Half of the students (50%) said they struggled with official communication, forms, and academic instructions due to the predominance of English or formal Hindi.
- 63% said that faculty rarely used simple language or offered translation support, making it hard to understand lectures or assignments.
- Some even expressed fear of asking questions, worrying that they would be mocked for their accent or errors.

This shows that academic assimilation is being hindered by linguistic exclusion, which indirectly creates a power hierarchy within classrooms.

Low Participation in Leadership Roles

- Only 2 students out of 30 had ever taken up student leadership positions or event management roles.
- Most cited self-doubt, a sense of not “belonging,” and lack of mentorship as major reasons.

- One respondent mentioned, “I don’t think anyone would vote for a tribal girl with no English.”

These sentiments show that institutional encouragement and positive role-modelling are severely lacking.

Interpretation:

The pilot study reveals that Bhil students face more than just cultural change they confront structural exclusion in urban academic spaces. Their problems are not just about missing home or learning Hindi but are deeply connected to the absence of inclusive systems that recognize, support, and celebrate tribal identities.

Urban universities, in theory, promote diversity, but without targeted interventions, tribal students become passive participants, surviving but not thriving. The current system demands adaptation from the students, but rarely adapts for them.

4. Findings and Suggestions

Key Findings

Based on both the primary pilot study and a thorough review of secondary literature, several key findings have emerged regarding the acculturation of Bhil migrants in Bhopal:

1. Selective Acculturation is Common

Bhil students retain many of their cultural practices, particularly language, rituals, and food habits, in private or home settings, while adopting urban norms like dress codes and language in academic/public spaces.

2. Emotional Conflict and Identity Tensions

Many students experience emotional distress, confusion, and a fragile sense of belonging due to the pressure of “fitting in” without losing their tribal identity.

3. Lack of Institutional Support

There is a glaring absence of tribal-inclusive policies and representation at the university level. From language-friendly resources to visibility in student life, Bhil students feel underrepresented and unsupported.

4. Limited Participation and Self-Doubt

Students often refrain from leadership roles or active engagement due to language barriers, past discrimination, and a deep sense of inferiority or cultural “difference.”

5. Dual Life

Bhil migrant students tend to live in “dual cultural worlds”, one tribal and private, the other urban and public, creating a silent but continuous psychological burden.

Suggestions

To support Bhil migrants and other tribal students in higher education, the following institutional and policy-level suggestions are proposed:

1. Establish Tribal Student Support Cells

Every university, especially those with high ST enrollment, should create functional tribal support cells offering counseling, scholarships, legal aid, and peer mentorship.

2. Cultural Inclusion in Curricula and Events

Universities should include tribal literature, festivals, food, and music in their academic and extracurricular calendars to validate students' identities.

3. Training Faculty in Cultural Sensitivity

Conduct regular workshops for professors and staff on inclusive teaching methods,

non-discriminatory language, and cultural empathy.

4. Language-Accessible Academic Materials

Provide assignments, notices, and exam guides in bilingual formats (English + Hindi or Bhili dialects where feasible). Peer translation groups can also be institutionalized.

5. Tribal Representation in Student Councils

Ensure that Bhil and other tribal students are encouraged and supported to take leadership positions in student governance.

6. Bridge Courses and Induction Programs

Organize preparatory classes for tribal students on academic expectations, digital tools, and urban life before the start of semesters.

7. Partnership with Government and NCST

Universities must liaise with institutions like the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) to report tribal inclusion data and seek structural guidance.

5. Conclusion

This research paper explored the nuanced and layered process of acculturation among Bhil migrant students in Bhopal, particularly focusing on their lived experiences at SAGE University. Using a mixed-method approach drawing on both secondary literature and a pilot primary study, this work has attempted to capture how these students navigate between their indigenous identity and the demands of urban academic life.

The study clearly shows that Bhil students are not passively assimilating into city life. Instead, they are actively negotiating what to retain and what to adapt. While they continue to

speak their native dialects, celebrate traditional festivals, and hold on to cultural rituals, they are also learning new languages, adopting urban behaviours, and modifying their outward appearance to “fit in.” This process, defined by selective acculturation, reflects resilience as much as it reveals vulnerability.

Yet, this adjustment does not come without a cost. Many respondents expressed feelings of social invisibility, emotional stress, and identity dilution. While urban spaces like Bhopal offer education and mobility, they also create new hierarchies, often pushing tribal students to suppress parts of themselves to be accepted. The study found that institutional support for tribal students is minimal, often limited to formal quotas rather than meaningful inclusion. Most students remain on the margins of campus life, seldom participating in leadership or mainstream events.

The paper also underscores the absence of culturally sensitive infrastructure, ranging from a lack of ST-specific support cells to minimal tribal content in the university’s cultural or academic representation. This reveals a larger structural failure, not just of educational institutions, but of urban policy at large, which continues to neglect the emotional and cultural integration of tribal youth in migration contexts.

In conclusion, Bhil migrant students are actively shaping new identities in urban India, but they need more than personal effort, they need institutional recognition, representation, and support. If higher education spaces are to be truly inclusive, they must move beyond access to address issues of belonging, respect, and representation. This research contributes to a small but growing body of literature that calls for a more equitable, empathetic, and culturally aware academic environment, one where Bhil students, and others like them, are not just admitted but are fully included and empowered.

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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