

Interventions



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Investigating the Narrative Voices in Bheel Mahabharata

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Abstract

This essay writes about the re-visioning of the Mahabharata in the oral narratives of the Bheels. It takes up a few episodes to show how differently they and the characters in the original text have been represented in this re-visioned text.

Keywords: *subaltern, tribal, interpolations*

Epics naturally speak of winners. Representations of the winner(s) constructing cultural genealogy for the dominant group (s), push the so called non-dominant to the periphery of narratives of such tales. This is a conscious pedagogic agenda embedded in the epics wherein the subalterns do not generally have the narrator's voice, as suggests Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in, "Can the subaltern speak?" The intent of the writer was to find alternative/subaltern voices and identity. Literature when written by the subaltern should not be seen as mere narration but must be identified as a form of protest. Sharankumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic Dalit Literature* suggests that the standards of evaluation of Dalit literature should be thus: a) Artists must be motivated by their experience b) Artists must socialize their experiences c) Artists experiences must seem relevant to all time. ¹In the paper, using the above arguments, I would attempt to read the *Bheel Mahabharata/BheelBharath* as a text full of subversions and one that challenges many notions of conventional superiority in terms of class as well as gender.

The Bheels from Rajasthan are tribals, residing in the margins of the society for long. They claim that they were the descendants of the Rajputs. A version of their descendant history also goes thus: Lord Shiva had lost his bull and it was apparently stolen by one of his sons. On learning

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this, he dispelled the errant son and the descendants of the latter are believed to have become the Bheels. The story finds support from the fact that the Bheels sometimes steal bulls for farming, as a sort of a ritual even today! *Ram-Sitamani Varta* and *Bhilonka Bharath* are the two folk-epics that happen to be popular amongst Dungri Bheel tribals .ⁱⁱThe rich cultural tradition of the Bheels gets manifested in their rituals namely their songs and dances, their community deities, myths and lore. Their homes reveal an innate sense of aesthetics and suggest their close interaction with nature. The Bheels plaster their walls every year and decorate them with clay relief work called *mittichitra*. The materials used in their paintings are simple, homemade stuff like pigments extracted from the leaves and flowers of various plants, daubed on with brushes made of rag or cotton swabs fastened to twigs of neem (a plant). One interesting facet of Bheel life is that Bheel Gods and Goddesses are part and parcel of their everyday life. Be it births or weddings, songs are sung to invoke the blessings of elders, ancestors and deities. During their festivals, the Bheels dance the ‘garba’ and through their songs, invite the goddesses to join them. Interestingly, sometimes in certain songs, a *devi* that is a goddess is found replying that she would not be able to join the dance as her baby needed attention. The Goddess gets a very human touch! This sensibility of giving Gods a human touch is extended to other forms of art practiced by Bheels such as *Jhabua Pithora* painting. *Pithora* horses are actually painted by the *lekhindra*, the traditional painter and offered as a tribute to the Gods. According to a myth, in the kingdom of Dharmi Raja, people had forgotten how to laugh or sing and dance. Pithora, the prince undertook a journey on the horseback to the abode of the goddess Himali and the people were given back their laughter, songs and dances. Pithora wall painting is a wonderful depiction of the Bheels’ ability to be able to create myth. Everything connected with Bheel life gets painted. Nature finds a prominent place namely: the Sun, the Moon, the animals, trees, insects, rivers, paddy fields; mythological figures like the god *Bhilvat Deo Baramathya*, who has twelve heads and then there

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is *Ektangya*, who has only one leg also get painted. The Bheels like most tribals live close to Nature which they respect and celebrate.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bheel Mahabharata is a wonderful celebration of life. This tribal epic shows Draupadi (*Dhopan*) as the dispenser who is all powerful and in control of her life – a contrast from Vyasa’s Draupadi who is often left at the mercy of the men in her life. She is not the lone case in the tribal epic – woman’s supremacy is also celebrated in *Bheel Mahabharata* through *Kutamab* (Kunti) and *Hodara* (Subhadra).

An interesting episode of the *Bheel Mahabharata* is the *Draupadi-Vasuki* episode. Bhagwan Das’s version states that the ‘Earth could not bear the weight of Draupadi’s golden tresses’. When a golden hair fell on the earth, it split and fell on the breast of the sleeping king of *Paatal* (Underground), Vasuki. Awakened, Vasuki began to seek the golden-haired woman and his search ended in the inner apartments of Hastinapur, the capital of the Pandavas. Naturally, there is a duel between the mighty Arjuna and Vasuki. The serpent king flings Arjuna on the ground, mounts upon his chest and finally bound his hands and feet with a hair from his whiskers, icing it by hanging him upside down just above Draupadi’s bed! Queen Draupadi has to care for the powerful intruder: she bathes Vasuki in a copper tub and feeds him from a golden plate. Finally, he approaches her bed dressed resplendently. Draupadi sprinkles flowers and musk oil on the soft bed and is not hesitant in desiring Vasuki. The king of *Paatal* makes love to her on the bed while poor Arjun helplessly watches the erotic sport hung at the top. When dawn breaks, a non-chalet Vasuki cuts the hair that held Arjuna with his gleaming sword. Arjun drops with a thud on the ground, his pride and sense of being as a husband reduced to dust. Do you see any glimpse of Arjuna, the dashing hero who had won women and wars with élan? It is said in *Bheel Bharath* once Draupadi’s desire for a lover is burnt up – she stands purified and progresses towards

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salvation. The episode on one hand is indicative of the Great Mother-cult of the *Nishads* (tribals) that also included tantric practices; on the other it breaks conventional gender stereotypes.

Sociologists have noted that serpent legends abound in mainstream Rajasthani culture. Vijaydan Detha one of the well-known folklorist from Rajasthan has collected several snake stories and compiled the retellings of these folklores into ten volumes. The tenth volume has ten serpent stories that include the familiar story in which serpents assume human form and get into relationship with women. In all these serpent tales, snakes are 'ichadhari' having the ability to talk as they take up human form or any other form. These serpents also possess huge wealth in their pits or homes that are usually underground palaces – wealth that would put the richest of emperors to shame. The reason to augment this side of the culture where snakes are powerful and wealthy in this paper is to make the suggestion that the *Draupadi-Vasuki* episode of the *Bheel Mahabharata* grows from this belief of the people of the area that venerates snakes and believe snakes are indeed in possession of much power. Thus unlike other fabled snakes Kalia or Thakshak of Sanskrit *Mahabharata* who are made to eat the humble pie, Vasuki in *Bheel Mahabharata* is powerful and even mightier than Arjuna! Prof. L.M.Joshi rightly pointed out that, "Characters and episodes like that of Vasuki have been marginalized in the standard text but glorified in the tribal version as the tribals relate more to Nature than characters. This is precisely the reason why the epic was interpreted to suit their needs and traditions".^{iv} (Arjuna was given decisive victory over Takshak, the snake king in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* when Takshak was uprooted from own his land forced to aid the Pandavas build their capital, Indraprastha). Joshi further states an interesting fact about the folk epic:

Variations and interpolations are bound to happen as the text passes through different cultures. The tribal culture is one such case. This could be seen in the character called *Bala Himmat* who is Abhimanyu in the standard text. The word 'himmat' has its root in 'ahi-mat' which means the clever serpent. Tribals give more importance to such

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characters. The beauty of it all is that in the end the moral does not change even though characters play different roles. (Source: *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad edition, 6th September, 2003. Article: *Tribal 'Mahabharat' has Epical Deviations* by Paul John)

Expectedly, the *Bheel Bharata* is dominated by folktale quality. There is an interesting facet of this epic, characters are brought to existence when they are needed, thereafter if there is no need felt, these characters simply cease to exist with no explanation provided. Thus one feels the structure of the child's imagination at play in the narrative strategy of the epic. This can be elaborated more clearly thus: Draupadi's maids are there only when needed. Meals happen to be elaborate – a full thirty-two course. The surprising part is that though Draupadi is the queen, the maids do not cook the elaborate meal for Vasuki but it is she who cooks and serves Vasuki personally! This conveniently fits into the scheme where she needs to develop proximity to Vasuki so that she can learn from him the secret that can undo him. Apart from this, the way Draupadi wriggles the secret out from her monster-lover what can cause his death, is a methodology commonly used in folktales. The monster could be holding a damsel prisoner in a dark cave or there can be a magician or as here where the demon comes and forces himself upon another man's wife for days on, the strategy of discovery of the weakness of the monster/devil in question is recognizably identical. First Draupadi convinces Vasuki that she is in love with him and gets him to reveal the secret of his own undoing. So when he sleeps unsuspectingly at night, 'she creeps into his belly and learns the rest of the secret from there' – for it is in peoples' bellies that secrets are kept^v in folk tales.

When scanning through the *Bheel Bharath*, we are struck by one thing– it is the equation in the male-female relationship: we see male submissiveness to women, women as equal and at times even domineering! In reading the *Bheel* epic, we notice that unlike the Sanskrit version of the epic, women here are not subjected to dependence on the pillars of patriarchy namely the fathers, husbands or even sons for protection. Thus power, dominance, culture, prestige – qualities that

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are oft associated with men are here presented in terms of women. The Bheel consider women as ‘dangerous and terrifying’ hence it is logical that women are referred to as ‘Daayan-devi’ (witch-goddess). In mainstream literature, when a woman is called a ‘witch’ it means negativity/evil, while here in the tribal epic it represents power. In the folk-epic of our discussion, Jhethodar (Yudhishtir) not only acknowledges the rapidly form-changing Draupadi as Devi (goddess) but worships her by touching her feet. Bheem, who had been spying, sees Jhethodar touching the feet of Draupadi becomes furious and decides that he would either kill his brother or Draupadi or himself; after all however a powerful a wife might be, one cannot fall at her feet. Coming to know of his anger, Draupadi asks Bheem to come one night to a vermilion-red banyan tree. Under the banayan tree at midnight an assembly of the Navalakh (nine hundred thousand) gods and goddesses is held where Dhopan (Draupadi) comes riding a lion, the possessor of thousand hands holding flaming lamps, swords and skulls. Bheem sees to his surprise that the Supreme Creator rises from his silver throne and seats only when she had seated herself on a golden throne. The whole episode breaks Bheem’s male arrogance and he comes to fear the powerful goddess. Draupadi declares her plan to the creator that because out of the five Pandavas, only Yudhisthir had bowed before her power; hence, only after having killed the other four brothers would she return to Vaikunt (heaven), her rightful abode. The next night a weeping Bheem falls before Draupadi and wimps that she as well as his mother was Dayan Devi, hence all powerful. Numerous other occasions prove the great status of Kunti and Draupadi in the tribal epic.^{vi} No important decision, be it of a wedding or of war, is ever taken in the *Bheel Bharath* without their involvement or consent. So the straight jacketing of gender cannot be applied to this epic. Such status of women suggests that they are obviously not going to cut a sorry figure of woe and pain. Is it then possible to see this as a universal tribal characteristic? Anais Nin who had made a wonderful point by drawing from Lawrence Van der Post, the Jungian psychologist and poet, in her book *A Woman Speak* ssays: “there is a beautiful part in one of his books where he says the

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Africans never suffered from loneliness as we have; they never suffered from the feeling of the meaninglessness of their life, as we occasionally have”.^{vii} The women of Vyasa’s epic are lonely and oft in pain namely Satyawati to Gandhari, from Madri to Kunti and above all Draupadi whose pain becomes immeasurable and remains unattended many a times. The latter is famously said to be ‘*nathavatianathavato*’ meaning though she belongs, she is like an orphan. She is painstakingly alone even when she accompanies her husbands to heaven. On the way, she falters somewhere in the Himalayas, four of her husbands do not slow their steps, for them a greater glory of heaven is more luring than consoling their companion who has been with them in thick and thin. Only Bheema enquires of Draupadi’s pain. The Bheel-like Africans live and survive in groups, in their lives joy and pain both are shared.

The tale of Ganga and Santanu in the tribal epic further reinforces the idea of woman being in a commanding position than in the Sanskrit version. In the tribal epic, Ganga first appears taking a bath in the river Ganga, for which she had come up from the thirteenth Patala, the thirteenth netherworld. She does marry Santanu after having rejected him in his earlier two births! The *Bheel Bharath* harps on the unequal relationship between Ganga and Santanu. In Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* too Ganga had been a river goddess with supernatural powers but the kind of power she executes in the Bheel epic is far more domineering! The Bheel epic follows a similar line like Vyasa’s epic: King Santanu had agreed to a kind of pre-nuptial clause that he would drown all the children born of the wedlock. Consequently the three children namely: *Gagivar* (Gangeya, Bheeshma), *Setar* (Chittar, Chitra, Chitrangada) and *Vihag* (Vichitra, Vichitravirya) are killed by the king as he had promised. However he cannot bring to kill his fourth child who interestingly is a girl. He gives the newborn girl to his guru. The king saves the girl-child possibly because he hopes that the girl would look after him in his old age. Ganga walks to the river to find out if Santanu had carried out her instructions. Ganga sets out to find the truth. With

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the help of a folk magic aura, she goes to the sea and plants two rows of barley standing on one foot praying to God. She discovers that some barley had dried and instantaneously realizes what Santanu had done. Coming back to her cloud palace she decks in 'solashringaras' (ornamentation) where she decides to confront Santanu. She prepares an elaborate meal for the King and at the table she once again asks the king how many children he had killed. Santanu maintains he had killed all of his four children. An angry Ganga threatens to end their relation and then reveals the truth: Ganga claps her hands and at each clap a child appears before her – Gangeya, Chitra and Vichitra, the three children but the fourth child does not. Ganga accuses Santanu of not telling her the truth and then disappears leaving the king with a gold bangle that would allow him to recognize her in her next birth. The king is left with five strands of her hair that break off as he tries to hold her back by her tresses. It is clear that in the relation between Ganga and Santanu, it is Ganga who is in full command of the situation. An inversion occurs as Ganga, the woman initiates the sexual act. The tribal epic provides elaborate mating ritual acts and always shows Ganga having an upper hand. So when Ganga decides to give birth; it is her decision and in no way is it a submission to her man. Santanu needless to say loves her too well but is equally afraid of her! In spite of this, Ganga cannot be accused of being unkind to her husband for she leaves him with a promise to be his in another birth. The *Bheel Bharath* celebrates the power of womanhood of Ganga: her sexuality as well as her psychological power. Her dominating personality does not make her cruel or overtly domineering. True, she has the final say but she does it with conviction: strong yet filled with certain mellowness. Another case of inversion of gender stereotype in the tribal epic is an episode where a man gets sold by a woman. Bheem sets out to find a man who needed to be sold by a woman: he needed such a man as a prerequisite for performing a successful yajna. All women refuse saying they cannot sell their husband/ brother or father. Finally, Bheem meets a courtesan who agrees to sell a man. Strikingly, the episode is a reverse take on the Draupadi episode in the Sanskrit text where one of

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husbands pawn her in a game of dice as an entire court of educated and brave men remain silent at her disrobing.

If a person of the Doongri Bheel tribe in Sabarkantha and Banaskantha is called to sing the version of the epic, then expect the most unexpected characters to crop up and wage war. Scholars have rightly noted that tribals only use oral tradition of passing on their version of the epics from one generation to another. Narrators needless to say add interpolation that is in sync with tribal belief and culture. In *Bhilo Ka Bharat*, a compilation of tales from the Doongri-Bheel version of the Mahabharata, author Bhagwandas Patel interestingly notes that unlike in standard texts where continuous narrative is a norm, the tribal epic given the fact that there has been too many interpolations and even deletion, look more like a compilation of disjointed episodes. The Kauravas unlike the standard text do not get mention in the tribal epic. It is also not clear where exactly does the war take place. An interesting addition is the Abhimanyu and Indrani episode where Indrani, the wife of Lord Indra wants to marry the Kauravas! The Kauravas realizing it cannot be a prudent decision do not accept her proposal. Indrani then marries Abhimanyu. Naturally this provokes Indra who makes a valiant attempt to get back his wife. Then what happens can only happen in the space of the tribal epic: Abhimanyu defeats the King of Gods!

Another interesting interpolation also is in the Vasuki-Arjun encounter. A phenomenal difference is in the presentation of Arjun. There is no hero-worship for him, rather he is presented as weak and even vulnerable. Arjun arrives only after the end of the great-war and hence is no war hero. In the Vasuki-Arjun episode, for Vasuki to defeat the fabled hero seems a simple task as he dangles Arjun with a hair of his moustache forcing him to be a hapless witness to his and Draupadi's love making. When days later, Draupadi does understand her "mistake", she tells Arjun to take Karna's help to fight Vasuki. It seems even Draupadi had not much faith in Arjun's acumen as a warrior!

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Interestingly, scholars have observed that, nowhere in these episodes there is a mention of kingdom or statehood as it is in the standard text. Tribals are not familiar with the concept of political boundaries and castes. For them the word 'Bharat' means 'war' and not 'nation'," as noted by Aruna Johshi (Head of the publication department of Bhasha Research & Publication Centre). Guarang Jani, a sociologist based in Ahmedabad as well as a tribal activist further pointed out: "Tribals feel more attracted to episodes which talk of displaying power, valour and prowess. Also, instances where women are emancipated and respected are carefully read as tribals respect for women." (Source: *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad edition, 6th September,2003. Article: "Tribal 'Mahabharat' has Epical Deviations" by Paul John)

There is however a notable deviation in the Bheel text. Krishna is in possession of the knowledge that Abhimanyu was possessed by a *Rakshasa* while he was still in the womb and therefore had demonic qualities in him. This prompted Krishna to want to put an end to Abhimanyu's life later during the war in *Bheel Bharath*. In the said epic, the child in Subhadra's womb kept growing steadily. Krishna is acknowledged as an 'avatar' in the tribal version too. Nonetheless, Subhadra's state forces him to look for a bridegroom a bit too quickly. Sensing this urgency, the Kauravas do not accept Subhadra in marriage. On the other hand, when the proposal is placed before the Pandavas, they too sense foul play but appease the 'avatar' by accepting Subhadra. The child Abhimanyu is born and soon grows into a fearless and dauntless warrior. A point of similarity is that when the Bharata war is poised to begin, Abhimanyu is said to be an adolescent and married to Uttara (Enatara).

The most fascinating deviation is the cause of the war itself. The feud is over a property division done under the arbitration of Krishna wherein the Kauravas believe that they have been taken for a ride. The tribal version says that indeed the Kauravas were wronged. When the Kauravas threaten war, the Pandavas are reluctant as Arjuna was away to get rhinoceros hide

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from *Patala*, the abode of the *Nagas* that was needed to make shields to be used in the war. The hesitancy in the voice of the Pandavas speaks of their lack of confidence in themselves. They are four in number with Arjuna being away and the Kauravas seventy-eight. It is again Abhimanyu who rules the roost as he accepts the challenge upon having read the letter from Dhuryodhan. Further, the grandeur of war in the original epic is much reduced with war in the tribal epic being only a seven day affair.

The tribal epic describes the war in about three hundred words which is in contrast to the length of five of the eighteen-parvas that it occupies in the Sanskrit epic. Apart from Abhimanyu and the four Pandava brothers, Krishna too fights on the Pandavas' side. The Kauravas make seven forts. It is said that Abhimanyu, the phenomenal warrior, destroys one fort each day thus almost rendering the Kauravas vulnerable. Abhimanyu successfully destroys the first six forts but Bheema's expertise was needed to demolish the seventh fort. It is said that Bheema moved steadily forward and was unstoppable and his valour even made Abhimanyu stand in admiration with his chin resting on the point of the bow. Abhimanyu's inattentiveness is an opportunity for Krishna whose task is also to slay the *IkoDanav* that is in Abhimanyu. Typical of the magical world, Krishna too has the power to assume any form. Assuming the shape of a mouse, he snaps the strings of the bow on which Abhimanyu is resting his chin and soon his head is flung far away. This way Abhimanyu achieves the glory of having died in the battlefield even as Krishna achieves his design. At the end of the war, the Kauravas are all killed. When it comes to Abhimanyu, the tribal epic makes many more deviations. The Sanskrit epic states that Abhimanyu learnt how to enter the *chakravyuha* (a military formation) from his father when in his mother's womb and we know famously with his mother having gone to sleep he had not learnt the art of coming out of the trap. When Yudhishtira asks him to break into the *chakravyuha*, Abhimanyu tells him: "Father has taught me the secret of breaking into the

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military formation but I'll not be able to come out of it in case of a crisis.” (*Upadishto hi me pitrayogo'neekavishatane; notsahe hi vinirgantumahamkasyamchidapadi. Drona.35.19*). In the *Bheel Bharath*, it is Krishna who teaches Abhimanyu the art of entering the *chakravyuha*– which in the *Bheel Bharath* is actually seven forts, one inside the other, rather than a military formation. There are some folk variations however where see Abhimanyu learn it the way we had seen in the standard Sanskrit text. A Telugu version shows Abhimanyu gaining this knowledge of entering the military formation from his maternal uncle.

The obvious question one arrives at is about determining the hero of The *Bheel Bharath*. It is neither Arjun nor Bheema but Abhimanyu, whom the Bheels call *BaloEmant*, the Audacious Child. The garland of heroism also falls on Karna and Bheema. It is not that ignominy is thrust on Arjuna. He is a hero out of a Vikramaditya tale, his expertise confined mostly to having women fall for his handsomeness but there is no mention of the valour and heroism that is usually associated with Arjuna. Abhimanyu however is heroism personified. The *Bheel Bharath* also makes an exception by not having Madri. There is no Drona, there is no Bheeshma, no Ashwatthama nor Kriparchaya in the war. We do not know if Karnahad participated in the war or not. There is no Drupada, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki... No Draupadi's children... It is just the seventy-eight Kauravas on one side and the Pandava brothers (minus Arjuna) and Abhimanyu and Krishna on the other. In the *Bheel Bharath*, Abhimanyu is the commander-in-chief of the Pandava army. His young wife Uttara is a magnificent character in the tribal epic – the Sanskrit epic's Uttara pales into a shadow figure before her. Some of the most moving scenes in the entire tribal epic deal with her. When the war is declared, she is at her mother's place and is desperate to reach Abhimanyu before it starts, for it is a sin for a warrior to die a 'virgin'. However, Krishna ensures that she is delayed, and also that she is unable to bring with her the magical liquid (*amarkuppi*) with which she would be able to revive Abhimanyu if he died.

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The *Bheel Bharath*, the incarnation of Vyasa's *Mahabharata* in the tribal world of the Bheels, is striking because of its unbelievable rustic simplicity and elemental quality. It is a rare beauty as the text brings us very close to surrounding beliefs and the way of life of the Bheels. Nothing is very complicated; all characters reflect very primeval emotions. There is no reluctance in glorifying Vasuki over Arjuna nor is there any hesitancy to say that Krishna has done something evil. There is no attempt to burden Draupadi with moral baggage. We get to see the reflection of the pagan world that had been in awe of woman's power. It is a fascinating revelation to see how *Mahabharata* looks when it sheds its traditional structure and incarnates in an entirely different world – in the world of those who live on the fringes of Indian society, the one who have been unfortunately labeled as 'subaltern'.

NOTES

All the references to *Bheel Bharath* in the paper are from *BheelBharath* by Dr.Bhagavandas Patel, who spent four years among the DoongriBheels studying the epic that is an oral tradition among them and thus making an invaluable contribution to literature in general, and folk literature and Mahabharata study in particular. It also allows us to understand how social and cultural aspects construct an epic. The book has been translated into Hindi by Dr. MridulaParik and published by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.(It is from Patel's text that states the Bheel name 'Bharath'is a neuter word in DoongriBheel, and means 'war', a clear take from (Maha) bharata).

ⁱSharan Limale, trans. Alok Mukerjee: *Towards an Aesthetic Dalit Literature*, Orient Blackswan, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Source: www.ecoindia.com, web accessed on 10th Feb., 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://blog.saffronart.com/2012/12/14/bhil-art-tribal-paintings-from-india>. Web accessed on 22nd Feb., 2017.

^{iv}Tribal 'Mahabharat' has epical deviations, Paul John, Times of India (Ahmedabad edition)6 Sep., 2003. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>. Web accessed on 14th March, 2018.

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^vVinod Pilav, *The Rape of Draupadi*. <https://vinodviplav.wordpress.com>. Web accessed on 25th Feb., 2017.

^{vi}Source : Bhagwandas Patel: *The Bheel Mahabharata*.

^{vii}*A Woman Speaks: The Lectures, Seminars and Interviews of Anais Nin*, ed. Evelyn Hinz, Swallow Press, 1975.

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