

Transcending Identities: Reflections from the Living Traditions of the Bhumkāl Movement in Bastar Region

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Abstract

Bastar's social and political landscape has been shaped by a long history of interaction between the indigenous population, external rulers, colonial powers, and later settlers. As a result of prolonged interaction with one another, the people of Bastar attained a social identity such as *Bastariya*, irrespective of caste, tribe, creed, and religion. Though they are independent in many respects, they unite when an external threat endangers their socio-cultural autonomy and livelihoods. Despite the individual personnel identities of each community, all the communities are proud to associate with their regional identity. The acculturation process led the tribes of Bastar to gradually emulate dominant Hindu traditions, socio-cultural and ritual symbols. As a result, a new middle-class educated group emerged among the tribes of Bastar who assert their Bastar identity to claim their rights over human as well as natural resources. With this backdrop, the present paper tries to understand transcending identities to maintain solidarity among the ethnic groups to act as a pressure group to assert rights over *Jal*, *Jamin*, and *Jungle*. Further, an effort is made to understand how the *Sarv Adivasi Samaj* acts as an agency in resurrecting the endangered traditions of Bastar through ethnographic and historical methods.

Introduction

Identity formation is a lifelong process in which individuals or groups share personal values, beliefs, social roles and goals through continuous contact in a given geographical area. The identity is fluid in nature and may change according to time and space. By and large, the ethnic groups attach to group behaviour rather than unique individual qualities (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Social identity theory given by Henry Tajfel (2004) emphasizes such group behavior who engage constantly to improve their condition by maintaining the social identity. It starts with social categorization by which individuals are clustered into groups to respond collectively to the complex social situations. They always search for innovative strategies to unite the group members to maintain their social identity. The ethnic groups of Bastar have been interacting for a long time and hence formed a common social identity known as *Bastariya*. Though every group is independent in many aspects of social life, they share common culture, language, and food patterns and hence unite when external threats endanger their socio-cultural autonomy and livelihoods. Forests play an important role in the socio-economic

and cultural life of their inhabitants and hence become an integral part in bringing about such a common identity. When the British annexed it, all these groups united to fight for *jal*, *jungle*, and *zameen*. At present, ongoing mining and other development works are affecting their symbiotic relationship with nature. Hence, people of Bastar are transcending their personal identities towards a common identity, i.e., Bastariya, to fight for their stakes.

Bastar is a newly created district with Jagadalpur headquarter in the state of Chhattisgarh, India. Before independence, it was a princely state controlled by Kakatiya rulers, Marathas, and the British. In January 1948, by merging the two princely states, Bastar and Kanker, a new district was formed as Bastar. Later, on March 20, 1981, the Chhattisgarh government formed Bastar as a division by including seven districts, thirty-two *tehsils*, and thirty-two development blocks. Currently, Chhattisgarh is divided into five divisions, and Bastar is one of them. Due to its cultural, archaeological, and geographical significance, it is popular in Chhattisgarh. Geographically, Bastar lies within the *Dandakaranya* forest belt, known for its dense tropical forests. The area's moist deciduous forests contain valuable species such as *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) and *Teak* (*Tectona grandis*), as well as rich mineral resources, i.e., Bauxite and iron. These geographical features shaped the local economy and contributed to Bastar's relative isolation, as the region's rugged terrain made it difficult for external powers to exert complete control over the area. The forests, central to the Bastar economy and society, also became a battleground for resistance, as historically colonial forest management and land use policies sparked unrest. This led to significant resistance movements, most notably the *Bhumkāl* Rebellion of 1910, in which tribal groups opposed the British administration's forest policies (Sundar 1997).

Historically, Bastar was not a backward region but was part of a more extensive cultural and political system. The ruins of medieval Shiva temples, inscriptions mentioning castes from various countries, and the presence of traders and priests in the region indicate that Bastar had connections with the outside world since long. The Naga kings, who ruled from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, were succeeded by the Kakatiya rulers, who continued to rule until 1947. More minor chiefs, or *zamindars*, appointed by the Kakatiya kings, retained significant power within their territories and maintained bands of mercenaries for local control. This political fragmentation and the continual power struggles between local rulers, external powers such as the Marathas, and colonial authorities define the political history of Bastar.

Indological scholars like Louis Dumont (1959) argue that the ancient Indian state is based on the concept of kingship, which is both secular and sacred. According to him, the king is not only a political ruler but also a religious figure who upholds the moral order of society. The *Arthashastra*, written by Kautilya, is testimony to this fact which clearly mentions the rights and duties of the king. In Bastar, the king's dual role is evident in how the monarchy was integrated into the tribal social structure and worship of the mother goddess (Dumont 1959). The tribal communities, while maintaining their own cultural practices, accepted the authority of the Hindu king as he is an ardent worshipper of Danteswari, who is identified as *Mauli mata* by the native. Hence, the people of Bastar saw him as a divine figure (Huber 1984).

Colonial rule introduced new dynamics into the social and political fabric of Bastar. Through indirect rule, the British administration worked with the local king and his adviser (*diwan*) to control the region. The British were wary of Bastar's dense forests and inhabitants, who had a reputation for resisting external authority through acts of rebellion (Huber 1984). While colonial administrators like Alfred Gell argued that the tribal people of Bastar used rituals like the annual *Dussehra* festival to exalt the king and maintain a weak state, Nandini Sundar (2001) argues that these rituals were part of a more complex dialectic between the people and the state. The Dussehra festival served as both a form of allegiance to the king and a moment of resistance, where the king was symbolically 'kidnapped' and forced to negotiate with his subjects (Gell 1980). Thus, the people of Bastar were under the control of the traditional authority of the royal family, enforced through divine worship of Goddess Danteswari. But were obliged by the king's power through the dominance of tribal ritual kidnapping. Even the tribal goddess Mauli mata was considered one of the incarnations of Kakatiya's Goddess Danteswari.

Bastar has a long history of rebellions, primarily driven by land use, resource extraction, and colonial forest laws. The three significant rebellions in Bastar's history—the uprisings of 1876, 1910, and 1966—reflect the region's socio-political struggles and its people's resistance to external control (Shukla 1991). The general pattern of these movements reflects a resistance to external intervention in tribal life, whether through direct exploitation or the imposition of alien political and economic systems. Though these rebellions were crushed, they had a lasting impact on the region, leading to a change in forest policies and greater caution on the part of issues with land and resource management. These movements were not merely reactions to external pressures but also expressions of deeply rooted cultural and political autonomy.

Though tribal communities are autonomous in nature, when a threat poses from external enemy, all are united under a common tribal identity. They are united by the use of powerful symbols like *Dara Miri*¹ institutions like *Gurghal*², folk songs and dance, music, etc. The composition of folk songs and lyrics is spontaneous, and even the present generation composes folk songs on resistance movements, agriculture, forests, and socio-cultural life. The traditions carried out by the elders or knowledgeable people who have some supernatural powers and special cryptic knowledge without any written records. Similarly, the legacy of the Bhumkāl movement is not only attributed to any one single ethnic community, but rather it is a collective fight against the colonial exploitation by the leaders from different ethnic groups. To cherish the legacy and tradition, all the groups of Bastar collectively celebrate Bhumkāl Diwas on 10th February every year in Bastar. Though Gunda Dhur (who belongs to the Dhurwa community) led the movement, he was assisted by tribal and non-tribal communities of Bastar. People resisted the external imposition on their culture, especially the closure of youth dormitories, restrictions on brewing *mahuwa*, and the introduction of *begar* (forced labour). It aims to get freedom from colonial oppression for all the communities

¹ Red chillies, lumps of earth, bows and arrows, spear and mango branches used as symbol of resistance to British power and invitation of *Adivasi* to support in the movement.

² It is a Youth Dormitory of Dhurwa tribe.

of the Bastar region. Hence, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, ethnicity, people of Bastar celebrate this event with pride and big fanfare.

Methodology

The present research design adopts an ethno-historical approach rooted in the traditions of history and anthropology, which combines archival sources, oral traditions, and participant observation. The archival documents are investigated at the field level for the reconstruction of past lifeways and cultural processes with anthropological insight. The *Bhumkāl* movement and its martyrs are traced in various national and state-level archives, libraries, and other document analyses. This archival data is cross-checked at the field level by visiting their origin villages. The written records are compared with living traditions, oral narratives, and genealogies from the living descendants. The oral accounts reveal the contrasting picture painted by the British. This interdisciplinary approach is critical for situating tribal actors not as peripheral or passive entities in history but as central participants (Behera 2020). This approach integrates ethnographic fieldwork, historical archival analysis, and cultural interpretation while taking the ethnic community as the fundamental unit of study. The fieldwork was conducted during February and March 2025 in Jagadapur and its surrounding villages, including Netanar. For the present study, the Dhurwa of Bastar are selected as Gunda Dhur belongs to this ethnic group. Since it is an ethnographic study, only the community elders, artists, performers, and lineage members of Gunda Dhur were included in the study. As a part of this, the researcher participated in all the programmes of *Bhumkāl Smriti Diwas* and gathered oral testimonies from community elders, working officials, office bearers of *Adivasi Samaj* and *Bastar Sarva Samaj*, descendants of martyrs, and custodians of their traditional knowledge. Particular attention was paid to cultural events like the Bastar Dussehra, Laxmi Jagar, *Bhumkāl Diwas*, etc., during which many communities engage in ritual retellings of their history. Testimonies are recorded in *Gondi*, *Halbi*, and *Chhattisgarhi*, with translation and community verification to ensure fidelity.

Content and narrative analysis are also used in understanding the oral histories as it reflects native's description of their cultural hero's contribution who fought against the British to relieve them from the clutches of oppression. Folk songs, metaphors, proverbs, stories, and music were used as a medium of communication and an effective means of expression of their solidarity and attachment to their ancestors. These songs have awakened the tribal consciousness as well as kept inspiring the young minds. They are generally sung in local Halbi or tribal dialects, and themes revolve around community solidarity, resistance, deep connection between people and land, and struggle for autonomy and self-rule. Further, unstructured, key informant, and focus group interviews with detailed check list were used to collect primary data. Finally, the study adopted Halbwach's (1992) theory of collective memory to analyse oral narratives not just as records of events but as cultural frameworks for meaning-making.

Institutional mechanism in identity maintenance

At present, a new middle-class educated youth formed Bastar Sarva Samaj, which acted as an agency for their identity and justice to its people from exploitation of *dikus*

and outreach to rural students in obtaining education and livelihood. Besides, each community has formed their respective *samaj* to protect the interests of its group. At present, more than 22 such associations are operational in Bastar. They are mainly *Dhurwa samaj*, *Koya samaj*, *Gond samaj*, *Muria samaj*, *Bhatras samaj*, *Halba samaj*, *Munda samaj*, *Parja samaj*, *Saora samaj*, *Kawar samaj*, *Gadaba samaj*, *Kamar samaj*, *Panka samaj*, *Panara samaj* representing the diverse tribal communities, whereas *Mahra samaj*, *Thakad samaj*, *Raut samaj*, *Sundi samaj*, *Kalar samaj*, *Banjara samaj*, *Kumhar samaj*, *Lohar samaj* represent occupational caste groups. All these associations got registered under India's Cooperatives (amendment) Act, 2011.

Every Samaj acts as an agency to inculcate the spirit of pride in their culture amongst the younger generation through living traditions, i.e., rites and rituals, folklore, folk dance and music, customary practices, and traditional institutions, etc. Further, all the ethnic groups were united under Bastar Sarva Samaj on important occasions like the celebration of Bastar Dussehra, martyr's commemoration day, first crop or fruit festivals, and so on. Among the diverse tribal associations, Dhurwa Samaj is actively working by reframing its activities from time to time to continue the legacy given by their ancestor, especially Gunda Dhur, who is catalytic for the Bhumkāl movement in 1910. Due to this reason, the present study focuses more on Dhurwa Samaj and its role in bringing solidarity among Bastar youth.

Dhurwa is a scheduled tribe community who organize themselves traditionally under the *Paik* and *Naik* system for social control. But the introduction of Panchayat Raj in tribal areas has weakened their traditional council, as real political power was vested in the modern *Gram Panchayat*. But still, the majority of the elected representatives take the advice of their traditional headman and priest. In 2006, Dhurwa formed a Dhurwa Samaj and got it registered under the Cooperative Act. Initially, Dhurwa strengthened the bodies at the village level and then focused on the regional, district and state level. One *chula* (fire hearth) was considered as one family, and 200 chulas (fire hearths) are considered as one Dhurwa village. Based on this calculation, right now Dhurwa Bastar *Sambagh* (region) has 69 bodies in Bastar district, and each body consists of 13 villages. They were known as Kshetriya Sambhag (regional bodies). Dantewada, Sukma and Bastar are having district level bodies. In every district headquarters, Dhurwa build a community building which is funded by the government. They are self-supportive in nature as they do not receive any funding towards maintenance from the government. To meet the day-to-day requirements of the Samaj, the office bearers used to collect Rs.120/- from every Dhurwa chula once a year. Thus, collected money was distributed in the ratio of 25:25:50 (i.e., region, district, and state-wise). This money was spent on organizing council meetings, transportation, and the arrangement of Dhurwa Sabhas or cultural activities. Likewise, all tribal/caste groups have formed their associations in Bastar and are organizing community events from time to time.

Once a year, Dhurwa organize Vaarshik Utsav where Dhurwa from all villages assemble and celebrate get-together parties. During such annual activities, they also honour their traditional leaders like Naik, Paik, Sirha, Gunia, and so on. The annual event was organized without the involvement of political parties. They have already built 17 community buildings, of which Kinderwada, Sukma, Darbha, Kokawada, Tongapal, Pakala, and Bastar are important ones. The Samaj have undertaken the celebration of Bhumkāl Smriti Diwas since 2007 as Gunda Dhur belongs to their Samaj.

From 2008, they have been actively engaged in the organization of Smriti Diwas along with the active participation of other tribal/caste associations of Bastar. In 2012, they arranged a statue of Gunda Dhur from their own funds. Later, the administration gave a space on Geedham Road, which they named it as Gunda Dhur Park after beautification by the district administration.

In due course of time, the elders of Dhurwa Samaj had several meetings to discuss their great leaders and their commemoration. For this, first they tried to create the imaginary view of Gunda Dhur to disprove the corrupted image created in social media. Later, they met Gunda Dhur *Padar*³ members at Netanar and held discussions about his whereabouts. Finally, they met Jogi Dhur, who is a third generation in the Gunda Dhur family, who came to know about Gunda Dhur through his father, Jaidev Dhur. Jaidev is the son of Gunda Dhur. Thus, Jogi Dhur narrated the life history of Gunda Dhur and showed the weapons used by him. Taking clues about his physical features and the weapons, Dhurwa Samaj prepared an imaginary drawing and engaged sculptors from Andhra Pradesh to make his statue after obtaining the approval of Sarva Adivasi Samaj. In a similar manner, they also made the Debrī Dhur. Harchand Naik and other leaders' statues were installed at busy public places in their memory. Ironically, their family members or descendants are not given any status of freedom fighters since government policy identifies freedom fighter status from 1935 onwards, who has participated in the freedom movement led by national leaders. This fact testifies that many unsung heroes from subaltern groups who fought against the British are not recognised as freedom fighters. It is only the mainstream leaders who participated in the national freedom struggle who are recognised as freedom fighters, as they possess jail and archive records. But the British deliberately removed many tribal leaders' names as they suppressed them by tagging them as criminal attempts, not freedom movements. Despite this mainstream politics, Bastarites still remember them as cultural heroes who sacrificed their lives for the cause of ethnic culture, rights over land and forest, and against the atrocities of colonial rulers in connivance with dikus. Observance of Bhumkāl Diwas is one such act which reinforces their native identity, rights, and protection against exploitation.

Celebration of Bhumkāl Diwas

During the fieldwork in February 2025, Sarva Bastar Samaj celebrated Bhumkāl Smriti Diwas on its 115th anniversary for a period of thirteen days. A grand inauguration of Bhumkāl Diwas was initiated in Jagadalpur city with the participation of Sarva Adivasi Samaj and Bastar Sarva Samaj combinedly. Finally, the conclusion was made at Gunda Dhur's native place, i.e., Netanar. In between, they used to visit other freedom fighter villages to pay *sewa arji* (homage). The event was marked by 500 to 600 people from Jagadalpur and nearby villages. The event began at Kakatiya Post Graduate College, Dharampura in Jagadalpur in the presence of bastariya and guests in their traditional attire wearing traditional musical instruments, bows and arrows, axes, etc. Guests from other villages are welcomed at the place in a traditional manner by

³ *Padar* is kind of ancestral totemic clan from which they originated.

applying *Tikki*⁴. The college premises witness a kind of *mela* or *madai* (fair) atmosphere where tribal artists tattoo clan, *garh*, and totem symbols on the visiting people on nominal charges. Some of the participants appeared in traditional ethnic attire, ornaments, headgear, bow, arrow, and axe in the rally, taking selfies, photos, and making videos.

Hawkers arranged temporary shops and sold indigenous jewellery made with aluminium ornaments. Around 10.30 am, the Adivasi Samaj elders offered worship to Veer Gunda Dhur by sprinkling Mahuwa mand (liquor), *nariyal* (coconut), *agarbatti* (incense), *anda* (eggs), and *chudipandri* (bangles). From there, Adivasi Samaj undertook a grand rally as per the devised route plan—P.G. College, Gunda Dhur Park on Geedham Road, Bhumkāl Chowk at Zilla Court, Gol Bazaar Veer Debri Dhur Shahed Sthal, and finally ended at the town hall. Soon after the initial offerings of Seva Arzi, everyone proceeded in a rally to Gunda Dhur Park, which is located on Geedham Road (in front of the Goddess Durga Mandir) at Jagadapur. There, participants offered Seva Arzi in memory of Gunda Dhur while paying tributes to the rest of the freedom fighters.

The procession witnesses a colourful extravaganza wherein participants appear in traditional attire accompanied by the lyrical movement of their bodies as per the folk songs, indigenous flute music, and drum beats. Some of the tribes do wear headgears made with broomsticks and cock feathers, *gamsha*⁵, cowrie garlands, neck and ankle bands, and so on. Thus, the procession exhibits the typical Bastar *Adivasi* culture, such as songs in the form of *mani*, *gurghal nritya*⁶, *geet uler geet*⁷, and *mandai*⁸ dance. This colourful procession takes place on Jagadapur's main roads via the decorated Chowk located at the Court. It has been named as Bhumkāl Chowk by the district administration, where some Bhumkāl themed art installations have been created. Here, participants also offered Seva Arzi, and the participants finally reached Gol Bazaar, where people offer garlands to the epic *Imli Jhad*⁹. Finally, the procession ended at Town Hall, where organizers conducted the Adivasi Sabha. The representatives or heads of all associations occupy their respective seats on the floor and give speeches in local dialects highlighting the significance of the Bhumkāl movement and thus urge the Bastariya to continue their culture and tradition to posterity. The members of the Royal family, Zamindars, foreigners, and the people from faraway places do participate in the cultural programmes after the completion of the Adivasi Sabha.

⁴ It is a traditional way of welcoming the guests or relatives by washing feet on wooden stool, applying vermillion and rice, and a warm two-way hug.

⁵ A kind of small cotton towel bearing tribal embroidery designs traditionally used by Adivasi on auspicious occasions.

⁶ *Gurghal* is a term used for youth dormitory among Dhurwa where male and female used dance holding together is known as *Gurghal* dance.

⁷ Folk songs sung in Chorus at the time of *Gurghal* dance.

⁸ The tribes of Bastar used to attend the popular village fairs known as Madai and perform dance in rhythmic beats are known as madai dance.

⁹ An epic Tamarind tree where martyrs were hanged in public by the British during *Bhumkāl* movement. It is still alive at Gol Bazar of Jagadapur town.

Table 1: Customary ornaments worn by women during rally

Sl. No.	Local name of the ornament	English/Hindi name	Material used for making
1	Chimpala	Neck band	Made with silver
2	Bichiya	Ankle band	Silver
3	Mundhi	Finger Ring	Silver
4	Paithadi	Payal	Silver
5	Khadu	Hand band	Rold Silver
6	Baakta	Shoulder band	Silver
7	Tadki	Ear Ring	Silver
8	Fulli	Nose ring	Silver
9	Paisa Anguti	Finger ornaments	Silver
10	Suta	Neck band	Silver
11	Fosakata	Hair ornament	Aluminium
12	Paatha	Half-Saari	Cloth
13	Kakkva	Comb	Wood
14	Siyyadi mala	Worn around neck	Siyyadi seeds
15	Kasa mala	Neck band	Vegetative material
16	Jhaap	Leg band	Siyyadi seeds

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Two varieties of *paatha*, known as Bandhi paatha and Sundermani Paatha, are worn by women in a traditional manner to replicate tribal identity along with wearing the above-stated jewellery. Further, men also wear traditional dress and weapons resembling their native identity.

Table 2: Traditional ornaments worn by men during rally

Sl. No.	Local name of the ornament	English/Hindi name	Material used for making
1	Paatha	Dhoti	Cloth
2	Gamcha	Towel	Cloth
3	Mundhi	Finger ring	Silver
4	Khado	Hand band	Rold-Silver
5	Siyyadi mala	Garland	Siyyadi Seeds
6	Khasa mala	Garland	Vegetative
7	Jhaap	Ankle band	Silver
8	Tuma/Tumba	Water carrier	Pitcher guard
9	Todi	Used in Sewa Arji	--
10	Tangiya	Axe	Iron and wood

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

During the rally, everyone raised slogans relating to the Bhumkāl movement and its leader, Gunda Dhur. Then rally arrive at Gol Bazar Chowk in Jagadapur, where martyrs were hanged to a historic *Imli Jhad*¹⁰. There, participants also paid tribute and Seva Arzi to Debri Dhur as well. The descendants of those who were martyred also participate in the event. They are honoured with mementoes, bouquets, and finally, the procession ends at the Town Club. After completion of the day-long rally, everyone relaxes at Town Club comfortably and listens to speeches by community leaders discussing how to conserve the *adivasi* as well as Bastar identity and deliberates on key issues pertaining to them.

The descendants of the martyrs who were immortalized in the Bhumkāl Rebellion are honoured with gifts and given the opportunity to share their thoughts. Finally, everyone took part in folk dances and songs while playing musical instruments. The event organizers also arrange a simple meal for the participants who have come from distant places. After completion of the meal, the organizers gave a warm farewell to the participants, requesting them to attend next year's celebrations.

According to records obtained from Jagadapur Central Jail, 52 revolutionary participants of the Bhumkāl rebellion were identified from Shukla's book published in 1991 by the organizers and reached out to their families or descendants for their honour.

¹⁰ On this tree, Debri Dhur and many of Gunda Dhur's comrades were hanged during the *Bhumkāl* Rebellion of 1910.

The tradition of honouring on this occasion is being continued by their ancestors for the cause of the Bastar freedom movement. Some of the martyrs' survivors or descendants who are not alive or traceable are commemorated by the Bastar Sarva Samaj unitedly offering floral tribute at the statues, and their names are engraved in memorials erected beside the main leaders.

Table 3: Bhumkāl Smriti Diwas Programmes held in Bastar Region, 2025

Sl. No.	Date	Event	Place
1	4/2/2025	On Tuesday Garlanding the statues of Tribal Freedom Fighters	Heeranar
2	10/2/2025	On Monday Sewa Arzi at Veer Gunda Dhur statue and Veer Debri Dhur Statue, rally in Bastar, Meeting at Town Club Ground (whole day programme)	Jagadalpur
3	11/2/2025	Sewa Arzi at Bantu Dhurwa memorial at his village	Kokawada
4	12/2/2025	Sewa Arzi at Gunda Dhur Statue at market centre	Sukma
5	13/2/2025	Commemoration program at Jakaran alias Bhikari Bhatra	Devda
6	14/2/2025	Programme and Sewa Arzi at Alanar Ladai Bata	Alanar
7	15/2/2025	Sewa Arzi at Harchand Naik native village	Raan Sargipal
8	16/2/2025	Sewa Arzi at Gunda Dhur Statue at Darbha market village	Darbha
9	17/2/2025	Sewa Arzi by the descendants of Mundi Kalar at his native place	Neganar
10	18/2/2025	Sewa Arzi at Gunda Dhur statue at market place of Bastar village	Bastar
11`	19/2/2025	Sewa Arzi to Debri Dhur at Elangnaar and Tongapal	Elangnaar and Tongapal
12	21/2/2025	Madkaami Masa alias Bhima Maria's native place	Kelavur
13	22/2/2025	Grand Rally by Sarva Adivasi Samaj from Gunda Dhur Park to Netanar village. Closing ceremony and Sabha at Netanar	Netanar

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Commemorating the Bastar saviours

The great hero of the Bhumkāl Rebellion was Veer Gunda Dhur, whose original name was Baaga Dhurwa, a resident of Netanar located in the present-day Bastar district of Chhattisgarh. The slang name was recorded in British records. Alongside him was Shahed Veer Debri Dhur from Elangnaar (in Sukma district). Both of these brave warriors, with the support of revolutionary martyrs from different communities of Bastar (both tribal and non-tribal occupational groups), took up the Bhumkāl Rebellion in 1910. They were fed up with the oppressive policies of the British and rose to protect their rights over water, forest, and the cultural interests of Bastar. The tamarind tree in Gol Bazar, Jagadalpur, still stands today as a reminder of the sacrifices of Shahed Debri Dhur and the other revolutionaries.

In memory of revolutionary leaders like Bantu Dhurwa, their descendants commemorate in the traditional manner of ancestor worship. They sang traditional songs while paying homage to him. There are no photographs or images of the Bantu Dhurwa available. Hence, a concrete memorial was built at their ancestral place in Kokawada, where he is remembered and honoured annually. Bantu Dhurwa is the ancestor of Pardeshi Baghel, Keniram Baghel, and Sonaru Baghel, who are his great-grandsons (third generation) of Kokawada village. On the occasion of Bhumkāl Diwas, Bantu Dhurwa's family comes to the venue with traditional drums, accompanied by their household deity (Kuldai), ancestral totems (Penu), and weapons that Bantu Dhurwa used during the Bhumkāl Rebellion. The traditional weapons are still preserved by the family and are brought to the venue, where they respectfully offer a Seva Arzi and remember Bantu Dhurwa with great honour. After the event, his family was given a grand farewell by the august gathering. Like Bantu Dhurwa, commemoration of Mundi Kalar, Jakaran Batra, Debri Dhur, Harchand Naik, and so on are also undertaken during Smriti Diwas at different locations by their respective family members along with organizers.

Culmination of commemorations at Netanar

After completion of the Bhumkāl Diwas celebrations for thirteen days (10th February 2025 to 22nd February 2025) the final valedictory celebration was held at Veer Gunda Dhur's birth village, Netanar. On 23rd February, the whole village was present at the Gunda Dhur Mela ground near a mammoth Gunda Dhur statue. It is like a mela or mandai day for Netanar village, where people from neighbouring villages throng to participate. At the place, organizers arranged a grand Sabha (meeting) in the evening. In the early hours, the organizers and volunteers assemble at Gunda Dhur Park with a procession jeep attached to digital sound systems and proceed to Netanar in a big bike rally. They were greeted at each village on their way by the villagers and joined them to proceed to Netanar. While covering the villages, the rally reached the venue in the afternoon. The venue had a grand entrance where Dhurwa women in their traditional attire received the visitors by washing their feet and applying Sindhoor mixed rice on the forehead. The visitors offered a token of money to them in the earmarked plate as a mark of respect. In the morning session, the family members, Sirha, Maati Pujari, Atpaharia, and others assembled at the Gunda Dhur Penu under the shade of a tree. It is hardly a hundred meters away from the main venue. Where worship of their Kuldevi

is observed by sacrificing roosters. Prior to this sacrifice, the Sirhas are possessed by Gunda Dhur and warn the villagers about their misdeeds and cautions about the ensuing dangers. Then the priest and elders pacify the possessed *Sirha's* and complete the worship in Dhurwa's traditional manner.

After completion of the traditional puja, organizers proceed towards Gunda Dhur's statue and circumambulate it three times around it. Soon after this, they keep the symbolic axe of Gunda Dhur brought from his Penu, are placed at his feet and offer coconuts, flowers and incense sticks. During the puja time, artists also circumambulate inside the premises of the statue along with drum beats, folk songs, folk dances, etc. The visitors are vying to take selfies, photographs, and videos. Even some of the youth made reels over there to upload to YouTube.

After completion of worship at the mammoth statue, all the elders who are present at worship, invited guests, organizers, artists, and audience reach the meeting venue. The selected people's names were announced at the venue to sit on the dais, and the remaining will sit in front of the venue, leaving a space in between them. There are no chairs or tables present on the dais; all the guests sit on the carpets. The invited guests are given a ceremonial welcome by tying the Dhurwa turban and Mahuwa mala (garland). Each one is requested for speech for a short period. In between the speeches, cultural programmes took place where traditional dances and songs were performed by school-age boys and girls, artists, singers, etc. At the conclusion of the meeting, food was distributed to all the people in Sargi leaves. A simple rice and dal with mango pickle is served. Many hawkers from Jagadapur arrange shops.

Cultural symbols of Bhumkāl movement

The traditional art forms and rituals are central to preserving people's history and cultural identity. Rituals like Lakshmi Jagar are observed irrespective of caste, tribe, creed, and religion in Bastar to ensure prosperity through sustainable yields. The customary practices not only assist in sustaining their ethnic identity but also exhibit autonomy during the colonial intervention. According to oral narrative, whenever people face famine-like conditions, they perform the Lakshmi Jagar ritual to seek the blessings of the paddy deity. Over time, it has become customary practice to ensure better crop yields and secure their livelihoods through reverence for nature and its resources. This ritual is observed once every three years during the month of Bhadon (September) on a Thursday, lasting for fifteen days.

Lakshmi Jagar involves worshipping Goddess Lakshmi (deity of wealth) and Lord Shiva (deity of paddy or dhaan) while invoking other deities like Sonkuvar and Vankuvar, Bhimsen, Mauli mata, Pardesin mata, Hinglajin mata, Tiranta mata, and Kankalin mata by the Dhurwa community. The ceremony begins by bringing a pair of paddy stalks from the field of the Mata pujari (priest) to offer a prayer. The celebration is marked by the women of the Dhakad community, also known as *Gurumai*, singing traditional *Dhankul* songs. Meanwhile, Mahara men play musical instruments such as the *Nangara*, *Tudbudi*, and *Mohri* to enhance the festive climate.

During the Lakshmi Jagar festival, the Dhurwa community creates intricate paintings using natural colours made from materials like burnt *tumba* mixed with *tora* oil for black, red *chui* soil for red, limestone for white, and *chandan* for yellow. Brushes

are crafted from *Chhind* tree twigs, and the artwork adorns the temple walls over a week. A significant aspect of the painting tradition is the depiction of Gunda Dhur, a revered figure considered a miraculous *Sirha* (traditional healer) and a community hero. Dhurwa honours his memory by painting his image alongside icons of community leaders such as the *mata pujari*, *mati pujari*, and village headmen, who play essential roles in dispute resolution and resource management. Stories of Gunda Dhur's bravery are told to children, instilling cultural pride and preserving the legacy of their folk hero. This practice reinforces the community's ancestral reverence and shared heritage.

The collective memory and social identity of tribal groups clearly demonstrate the significance of native culture. The paintings made during these rituals reflect the armed figures, ceremonial motifs, and symbolic animals. Warrior imagery indicates the community's remembrance of the tribesman who defended their land and traditional rights against British colonial forces. Thus, oral narratives play a crucial role in sustaining the collective memory and social identity of ethnic groups. Lakshmi Jagar is a significant ritual not only for the Dhurwa but also for other tribes as well as non-tribal communities, observed to invoke the divine blessings and community cohesion. The painting's depiction of ritualistic elements suggests the importance of these ceremonies as both spiritual and socio-political acts (Sahu et al. 2026). Empirical observations from field studies in Bastar highlight how Lakshmi Jagar is projected as a form of cultural assertion against colonial rule.

These rituals ensure the collective action and solidarity, particularly during periods of exigencies and socio-political unrest. The depiction of ceremonial scenes in the painting reinforces the role of rituals in maintaining community resilience. Thus, rites and rituals not only facilitated collective consciousness and cooperation in Bastar but also cherished the collective memory of their cultural hero's contribution. Further, they also reflect the community's concern for the environment. Symbolic representation of fauna, including lions and elephants, underscores the community's symbiotic relationship with nature and associated spiritual beliefs. According to Dhurwa folklore, these animals are often associated with protection and strength, essential qualities during times of conflict. The presence of warrior imagery and depiction suggests that oral narratives play a crucial role in sustaining the solidarity among different sections of Bastar.

Imli Jhad and Kuva (Tamarind tree and well)

The Imli Jhad is located in the central place of Gol Bazar, where commercial shops are operational now. Traders made temporary sheds at their premises. The path leading from the Tamarind tree to outside the market passes a well (*kuva*), which is filled with a waste dump and in dilapidated condition. British used this well to dump the bodies of Bhumkāl martyrs publicly to create a sense of terror among the people. It is also a place where Debri Dhur and others were hanged and dumped. Due to this reason, the procession also reached this historical tree and tied garlands to its trunk as a mark of paying homage. For this event, organizers had already decorated the precincts of the tree with coloured paper and decorative lights well in advance. The Imli Jhad at Gol Bazar in Jagadapur town still stands today as a reminder of Shaheed Debri Dhur and the other revolutionaries.

Rituals as a power of resistance

From the symbolic anthropology lens, rituals reflect cultural performances and complex systems of meaning that reflect and shape the socio-political dynamics of any group. Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework posits culture as a 'web of meanings,' where rituals act as symbolic texts that must be decoded (Geertz 1973). In the context of Bastar Dussehra, a 75-day festival in Chhattisgarh, India, these rituals reveal a negotiated interplay of authority, ritual, and resistance, drawing further on Alfred Gell's concept of coercive subordination (Gell 1997) and a dialectical framework, revealing how rituals such as Raja's symbolic submission to the deity Danteshwari simultaneously legitimize and subvert authority, reflecting the contested nature of political legitimacy where power is both imposed and contested through symbolic acts. Thus, symbolic anthropology emphasizes deciphering cultural symbols to understand societal structures. Victor Turner's 'social dramas' concept also highlights rituals as arenas for resolving conflicts and reaffirming social order. Coercive subordination refers to the subtle enforcement of authority through symbolic means, where compliance is elicited not by brute force but through culturally resonant acts (Turner 1982). This duality is vividly illustrated in Bastar Dussehra, where the Raja's ritual submission to the tribal deity Danteshwari becomes a site of governance and resistance.

Dussehra in Bastar is historically significant as a symbolic performance to legitimize royal authority. It was an extension of the agricultural economy in which it carried forward the village mela and madai (fair), or local festivals, wherein fertility was ensured, and sickness was evaded. The king was an essential figure for these rituals to unfold successfully at the level of the kingdom. Danteswari, the tutelary goddess of the Kakatiya dynasty, now emerged as a village mother goddess at the state level. The elevation of Danteswari to chief goddess status occurred due to the integration of local mother goddess traditions and the ritual worship of Manikeswari, the goddess of the Naga kings who had been defeated. Later, Bastar's chief deity Mouli mata was also integrated into this mother goddess cult. This brings forward a discussion of the nexus between these rituals and the consolidation of royal power.

The Raja's submission serves as a tool of governance. By deferring to Danteshwari, he positions his rule as divinely sanctioned, leveraging tribal cosmology to secure compliance. The state co-opts tribal symbols, embedding itself within local belief systems. The grandeur of the festival, orchestrated by the royal court, reinforces state presence, framing the Raja as both a spiritual devotee and a political leader. However, Gell ignores the role of royal force in first establishing the structure of the state or the terms of the mutual relationship between people and the king. This integration fosters a shared cultural space, reducing overt conflict and facilitating governance. However, such legitimate ceremonies are not only evident in Bastar but in neighbouring kingdoms in Orissa with the Adivasi populations; also, had one member of the dominant tribe performed the investiture ceremony, and no king appeared to find it belittling to be thus placed on his throne (Mahapatra 1987).

The festival epitomizes a negotiated relationship. The state's incorporation of local symbols limits its ability to impose external policies. At the same time, tribes gain recognition within the political structure. This reciprocity reflects Turner's notion of rituals as "social dramas" that mediate tensions. The dual function of Bastar Dussehra—

exalting and constraining authority—reveals how power dynamics are fluidly shaped by mutual accommodation and contestation.

The investiture ceremony in Bastar traditionally involved a dominant tribe placing the king on his throne, a practice that no ruler considered humiliating (Mahapatra, 1987). While Dussehra was typically an occasion for displaying public allegiance to the monarch, it was not an unconditional loyalty. The king's conduct and acknowledgement of the subjects' role were critical in maintaining this bond. Instances of fractured loyalty were evident during significant uprisings, such as those in 1910, 1876, and as far back as 1774.

Gurghal (Youth dormitory)

Gurghal is a communal living space shared by unmarried boys and girls, and they learn the living traditions of dance, folksongs, and playing musical instruments in the presence of elders. But they do not exist in the present context due to the impact of modernization and westernization. The introduction of formal institutions such as schools, colleges, clubs, and churches impacted these traditional institutions. The present generation is engaged in smartphones, movies, and other entertainment sources. As such, the age-old youth dormitory has become endangered in Bastar. Now Dhurwa Samaj is trying to revive the age-old institution and has made a request to the district administration for reconstruction in some of the ancestral villages. They are mainly at Chindawada, Chandragiri, Kukanaar, Kamanaar, Mauli Padar, Netanaar, Kolen, Marjum, Kinderwada, and Chitapur. At Gurghal, youth perform dance which is known as Gurghal Naach at the initiation of worship to their clan deities, celebration of first fruit ceremonies, and agricultural and other economic activities. The aim of presenting Gurghal Naach during the Bhumkāl Diwas procession is to attract adolescents towards their age-old institution and the revival of their tradition.

Dara Miri: A symbolic communication of resistance

Symbols play an important role in bringing collective consciousness among the people of Bastar. Red chillies, lumps of earth, bows and arrows, spear and mango boughs were collectively called as *Dara Miri*, which was sent to villages as symbols to mobilize people during the Bhumkāl movement. According to Pappu Ram Nag (President, Dhurwa Samaj) *jan samardhan keliye aam ki tahniyom mei mirchi bandhkar ghav ghav ghumate* means red chillis (symbol of protest or fight) were inserted into mango twigs (symbol of unity) are roamed in villages to invite them to participate in the movement. Gunda Dhur, with the cooperation of his *pargana* people, spread the message to revolt against the British by sending Dara Miri. The circulation of this symbolic material from village to village urges the people to join the movement by taking traditional weapons. Villagers receive these symbolic items with a grand welcome and utmost pride. They express their participation in the movement by offering worship to it and keeping at sacred place.

Sirhasar (Communal hut)

It is a community house where native medicine men treat the patients in the village. These houses were used by Bastar revolutionaries to hold their secret meetings and get

essentials. In Jagadapur, one such *Sirhasar* is present, which is known as *Muria Durbar*, built by Jhada Sirha of the Muria tribe for the treatment of war victims and to provide shelter to the freedom fighters at Jagadapur town. Initially, it was a traditional *kutchha* hut that underwent modifications from time to time. Jhada Sirha led the Bastar Rebellion in 1876 against the colonial exploitation of land and forest lands. According to Balbeer Singh (descendant of Jhada Sirha), who is working in All India Radio at Jagadapur, Jada Sirha was born in Bade Aarapur in Aagarvara Pargana of Bastar District in a simple Muria family. His forefathers practiced the Sirha tradition hereditarily, and hence Jhada became a Sirha (native magico-religious practitioner). Being a protector of people, he employed conventional forms of mobilization such as sending arrows to different villages, a symbolic call to take up arms and participate in the *guerrilla* war against the British. He uses *Lal Pagdi* (red turban) as a symbol of war and worn by the warriors. This symbolic method was deeply embedded in the tribal culture, emphasizing collective action and unity in times of external threat. Guerilla warfare was first used by Jhada Sirha as a chief technique to fight against outsiders who are unaware of the local terrain. He not only served as a leader but as a traditional doctor for his troops. Later, he was martyred on the bank of the river Indravati. Although rebellion was unsuccessful, it demonstrated a high degree of organizational capability and community solidarity among the tribes. Gunda Dhur and Debri Dhur were highly influenced by the guerrilla warfare of Jada Sirha, and with his inspiration, they revolted against the mightier British.

In the course of time, the significance of the King has come down, and it was replaced by a government official. After independence, administrators sit in the Durbar and listen to the people. The presence of a royal family member has become symbolic now. At the fag end of Dussehra events, all the tribal community heads, people, local leaders, government officials, including the district collector, and royal family members were present wearing Lal Pagidi and listened to the problems of people. Officials note these problems and try to solve them in due course of time. The same Durbar was even used during the Bhumkāl movement to meet the leaders. In the course of time, this building was renovated and constructed in tune with modernity. Now Sarva Adivasi Samaj use this bhavan for arranging *lok adalats* (people's courts).

Conclusion

With the contact of kingdoms, colonial rulers, and immigrant castes, the people of Bastar have undergone an intensive acculturation and gradually been brought into the fold of the great tradition along with economic organization. In the course of history, several occupational groups were brought by rulers and settled and internalized Bastar culture. The deciduous Dandakaranya forest has become the centre of the Bastar economy for all these social groups. Due to its rich natural resources, Bastar was annexed by rulers, the British and even practitioners of the neo-liberal economy. But people also defended their rights through negotiations as well as armed conflicts. As such, Bastar has a chequered history of rebellions, primarily driven by land use, resource extraction, endangerment of traditional institutions and forced labour. Though native communities are autonomous in nature, whenever threat poses from external enemy, all communities unite under a common Bastar identity. Thus, Bastar presents a unique condition wherein both tribal and occupational groups have formed a collective

identity such as Bastaria. In post-independent India, a new middle class educated groups were emerged in Bastar who assert their Bastariya identity to claim their share in employment, education, political space, and rights over human as well as natural resources. Every association is working for its aims and objectives, i.e., to improve the welfare of its members and to unite to enhance their devalued social identity in the developmental process. The association are united under Bastar Sarva Samaj activities such as smriti diwas, laxmi jagar, youth dormitory, and so on. They were acting as an agency to protect their *Bastariya* social identity, as highlighted by Henry Tajfel (2004), while protecting their distinct culture and living traditions. This agency is catalytic in observing the Bhumkāl Smriti Diwas wherein they exhibit their traditional dress, symbols, folk dance and songs, music and so on. They also use rituals such as Laxmi Jagar and Bastar Dusserah to perpetuate these identities as collective memory of Halbwachs' (2020) as cultural frameworks for reviving their ethnic identity and claim in local resources.

To protect their identity, the organizers are commemorating the martyrs in a traditional manner in parallel to modern ones, i.e., worshipping Penu, possession of Sirhas, worship of weapons, offering Mahuwamand, etc. Resurrection of cultural survivals in the form of traditional painting at Laxmi Jagar, veneration of Imli Jhad, and observance of a 75-day-long Dussehra, where every tribe and occupational group perform their part to accomplish the ritual. Through these rituals, indigenous people of Bastar protect their identity and express their solidarity for a common identity. Thus, people of Bastar strive to maintain collective Bastariya identity while transcending individual ethnic identities. At the same time, they are striving to preserve their distinct culture for the sake of Adivasi rights to assert their socio-cultural and political authority in the Bastar region.

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