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Traditional Practices of Dhiwar Community: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the Dhiwar community and their traditional practices. The Dhiwar community is traditionally engaged in fishing practices. This community lives on the banks of the rivers of the Vidarbha region, mainly in the Nagpur district of Maharashtra. The research tries to understand their daily life, fishing methods, traditional knowledge, and how modernization and urbanization have affected their way of living. The Dhiwars have deep knowledge about their surroundings, environment and ecology, which can be seen in their seasonal fishing methods like Dunga, Gher Jal, and Chadni chya machya. These practices are excellent examples of their knowledge about their surroundings and their keen observation skills.

The study is based on field visits, informal interviews, and participation in local activities. From what the author observed, traditional fishing still plays an important role in their lives, but many things are changing. Pollution, industrialisation, dropping water levels, and new government rules have made their work harder. Many people have started using nets made of plastic, bleaching powder to kill fishes for easy catch, and electric rods instead of older and safer fishing techniques. These modern methods are very harmful to the ecosystem in the rivers.

The Dhiwars are strong worshippers of Mahadev, Guru Dev, and Waghoba. They continue to celebrate old rituals like Beej Puja and Dulha Dev Puja, which show a mix of tribal and Hindu beliefs. Even though modern life has reached their villages, their customs, roles, and faith have not disappeared. Many parts of their old culture and traditions still continue with some changes.

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This study brings attention to how the Dhiwar community has adapted to change but still kept its identity. Their fishing knowledge, rituals, and stories carry both cultural and ecological importance, and documenting these practices helps to protect India's living heritage.

Keywords: Bhoi, Dhimar, Dhiwar, Ethnography, Traditional practices, Tribal.

Introduction

The *Dhiwar* community is traditionally engaged in fishing practices and is among the oldest fishing groups in India. They are found across the states of India and are called by different names in different regions all over India. A large population of *Dhiwars* live in *Madhya Pradesh*, *Chhattisgarh*, and *Maharashtra*. In *Maharashtra*, especially in the regions of *Vidharbha*, most *Dhiwar* families have settled near rivers and forest areas. Their homes are usually built close to riverbanks, which allows them to continue their traditional occupation of fishing and stay near their natural source of livelihood.

For generations, the *Dhiwars* have shared a deep relationship with rivers and forests. Their everyday life, customs, and beliefs are closely tied to the natural environment around them. Over time, though, this connection has started to weaken. Environmental changes, new government rules, and modern fishing equipment have slowly altered many of their age-old traditions. This ethnographic study tries to understand how their traditional lifestyle worked earlier and what kinds of changes have shaped it in recent years.

Previous works

The earliest and most detailed mention of the *Dhiwar* or *Dhimar* community appears in R.V. Russell's The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India (1916, 502–514). His record gives a valuable historical base for understanding the lifestyle, traditional work, and social status of the *Dhiwar* community during the early twentieth century.

Russell described the Dhiwars as having a distinct position among the working-class groups. He mentioned that because of their occupations, carrying palanquins, cooking, and supplying water, they were considered socially clean, and even Brahmans accepted food and water from them. At the same time, he pointed out that they might have originated from non-Aryan or tribal backgrounds, showing how the community was both included and excluded in social terms. His writing reflected the colonial mindset of that period, where communities were classified based on purity, caste, and labour, with little effort to understand their actual culture.

He noted that the Dhiwars were simple, cheerful, and hardworking, but sometimes described them as "easily cheated," a phrase that clearly shows the bias found in many colonial writings. Russell wrote about various purity rules

and internal divisions within the community, including the role of a caste head called *Batta*, who handled purification and readmission rituals for those who broke social norms.

Occupationally, Russell showed that the Dhiwars had a strong connection with water. They worked as fishermen, boatmen, palanquin-bearers, and water suppliers. Many were involved in growing *singhara* (water chestnut), selling roasted grains, and cultivating vegetables near the riverbanks. Some families also made mats from hemp, raised pigs, or kept silk cocoons, all of which reflected their close link with nature and water sources.

Religiously, he observed that the community worshipped several local deities such as *Dulha Deo*, *Ghatola Deo*, *Anna Purna Devi*, and *Gosain Deo*. Ancestor worship during festivals like *Akshay Tritiya* was also common. Animal sacrifices and offerings to water deities showed how deeply their faith was tied to nature and the rivers they depended on.

The present study of the Dhiwar community in Nagpur, Maharashtra, finds that many of Russell's old observations are still visible today, though several have changed due to modernization, government restrictions, and environmental decline.

Practices that continue

The community still depends on fishing as its main source of income.

Their understanding of fish movement, water flow, and seasonal changes remains strong.

Worship of deities such as *Mahadev*, *Guru Dev*, *Waghoba*, and *Dulha Dev* continues in many homes.

Rituals like *Beej Puja* and *Dulha Dev Puja* are still performed, though less often.

Their collective identity and unity around water-based traditions are still strong.

Practices that have changed

Old caste restrictions and purity rules mentioned by Russell are almost gone. Natural fishing tools like clay weights, wooden floats, and handwoven nets have been replaced by plastic and metal materials. Harmful methods like electric rod fishing and bleaching powder have become more common because of market pressure. Occupations like palanquin-bearing and water-carrying no longer exist. Hunting, which was once part of their livelihood during the monsoon, has ended because of government bans and urban life. Women now play a larger role not only managing homes but also fishing, processing, and selling fish, along with small trade work.

Russell's writing followed a colonial ethnographic model that often ranked communities by purity and occupation. Though his work provides useful details, it also shows the limited and biased understanding of that time, focusing more on caste rules than on the community's deep ecological knowledge or cultural reasoning.

The present ethnographic study takes a different view. It looks at the Dhiwar community from their own point of view, how they live, what they know, and how they have adapted to modern changes without losing their identity. This approach highlights their strength, their environmental understanding, and how they continue their traditions in changing times.

A comparison between the two time periods shows that the Dhiwar people's bond with rivers and fishing still defines who they are. During Russell's time, they had many different jobs and were socially tied to service roles under higher castes. Today, they are mostly self-employed fishers, facing new challenges from pollution and market pressure. Their rituals and beliefs survive, though many have changed in form. The strict caste-based purity system is gone, replaced by more practical ways of living.

In short, Russell's account gives a historical foundation, but today's Dhiwar community represents a living, changing culture, one that continues to balance between old traditions and modern demands, holding tightly to its connection with water, faith, and nature.

Other scholars like K.S. Singh have also mentioned the Dhiwar community in their ethnographic studies. K. S. Singh's People of India (1998, 256-259) gives one of the earliest detailed descriptions of the Bhoi community of Odisha, who are also known as part of the wider Dhiwar group found across central India. His work was part of a national project that aimed to document India's cultural and social diversity. Singh presents the Bhois as a water-based community traditionally engaged in occupations like fishing, boating, and carrying palanquins. He also mentions their link with the Gond tribe, among whom the term *Bhoi* is used respectfully. His study provides useful information about their population, language, customs, and social organization, classifying them under the Shudra category in the traditional *varna* system.

According to Singh, the Bhois lived mostly in the districts of Puri and Cuttack, with a population of about 69,500 recorded in the 1981 Census. He describes four main subgroups: *Mahabhoi*, *Tanhara*, *Gumhora*, and *Buna* and several clans such as *Naga* and *Sankha*. Most Bhois were landless labourers who later took up small-scale farming, animal rearing, and other jobs. They follow Hinduism and worship deities like *Jagannath*, *Mangala*, and *Tarini*, celebrating festivals such as *Rathayatra* and *Rajo*. Singh also notes their dietary habits, family patterns, and low literacy levels.

Study Area

This study focuses on the Dhiwar community living in and around the Nagpur district of the Vidarbha region in Maharashtra. Most families of this community are settled along the banks of rivers and lakes. Their main source of livelihood comes from fishing and other related work. The rivers, ponds, and nearby forests form an important part of their daily routine and traditional lifestyle, as their occupation and beliefs are closely linked with the natural surroundings.

Nagpur has a mixed climate: the summers are hot and dry, the monsoon season brings humidity and heavy rains, and the winters are quite cool. These seasonal changes have a strong effect on the fishing activities of the Dhiwar community. The type of fish they catch, the equipment they use, and even the timing of their fishing work all depend on the season. This area was chosen for the study because it clearly shows how a traditional fishing community like the Dhiwars is trying to adjust to modern times while still keeping its old customs and cultural values alive.

Aims and Objectives

1. To record and understand the traditional way of life, fishing methods, and customs followed by the Dhiwar community.

2. To study how their fishing techniques and traditions have changed with time under the influence of modern tools, environmental shifts, and government policies.

3. To find out which traditional practices are still continued and how they have been maintained in present times.

4. To explore the social, cultural, economic, and religious aspects that shape the daily life of the community.

5. To examine the roles of men and women in different community activities and understand how each contributes to the family's livelihood.

Research Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic methods. The study was carried out among the Dhiwar community living near rivers in the Nagpur district. The researcher visited their settlements several times and spent time with the people to understand their daily life and social practices. Methods such as direct observation, informal talks, and participation in community activities were used throughout the study.

The fieldwork was done in different seasons to see how their fishing patterns, social life, and rituals change with time and weather. Information was mainly collected through conversations with elderly members, active fishermen, and women who sell fish and other goods in the markets. Their personal stories,

local legends, and shared memories provided valuable insights into their traditional knowledge and the difficulties they face in modern times. All observations were written down and later studied carefully to present a detailed picture of the lifestyle and cultural practices of the Dhiwar community.

Ethnographic Survey of the Dhiwar Community

Figure 1: A Dhiwar man catching fish by using a traditional triangular hand net locally called as *pelni*.

The Dhiwar community has traditionally depended on fishing as its main source of livelihood. For generations, fishing has been more than just an occupation for them; it is a part of their identity and way of living. Their fishing knowledge is based on close observation of rivers, seasonal patterns, and the behaviour of different fish species. Over time, this knowledge has developed into a set of traditional techniques that change with the season, water level, and weather conditions.

Figure 2: A Dhiwar man fishing in deep water during winter

During the summer and winter months, when the water level in rivers goes down, fish usually move toward deeper areas. The Dhiwar fishermen are well aware of this pattern and adjust their fishing accordingly (Figure 2). This awareness reflects how deeply they understand the natural rhythm of their environment.

The community uses several traditional techniques such as the *Dunga* or *Jhadi* method (figure 3), net fishing, and trapping. In the Dunga technique, wooden sticks are fixed in shallow water around three to four feet deep for two to three weeks. Fish gather around these sticks and begin to live there. After some time, fishermen surround the spot with a long piece of cloth called Pasodi or Phadi, tie it with bamboo poles, remove the wooden sticks, and catch the fish using a triangular hand net known as Pelani (figure 1).

Figure 3: *Dunga* (wooden pile)

During the monsoon, rivers become dangerous and fishing in deep water is almost impossible. At that time, the Dhiwars change their technique. They use a circular net called Gher Jal or Ghor Jal, which is thrown into the water to trap fish. Another method used in this season is called Chadni chya Machya. In the monsoon, fish swim against the water current to lay eggs. The fishermen take advantage of this behaviour and go near the dams or bandhs to catch them more easily.

Different kinds of nets and fishing tools are used for different purposes (figure 4). Small fish are caught with fine nets, and sometimes even mosquito nets are used. For crabs, they use rods called Chadi, and for bait, they use small animals like lizards, chameleons, or earthworms. To store their catch, they use hand-woven bamboo baskets known locally as Dhuti.

Figure 4: A Dhiwar man taking care of the *jala* after fishing.

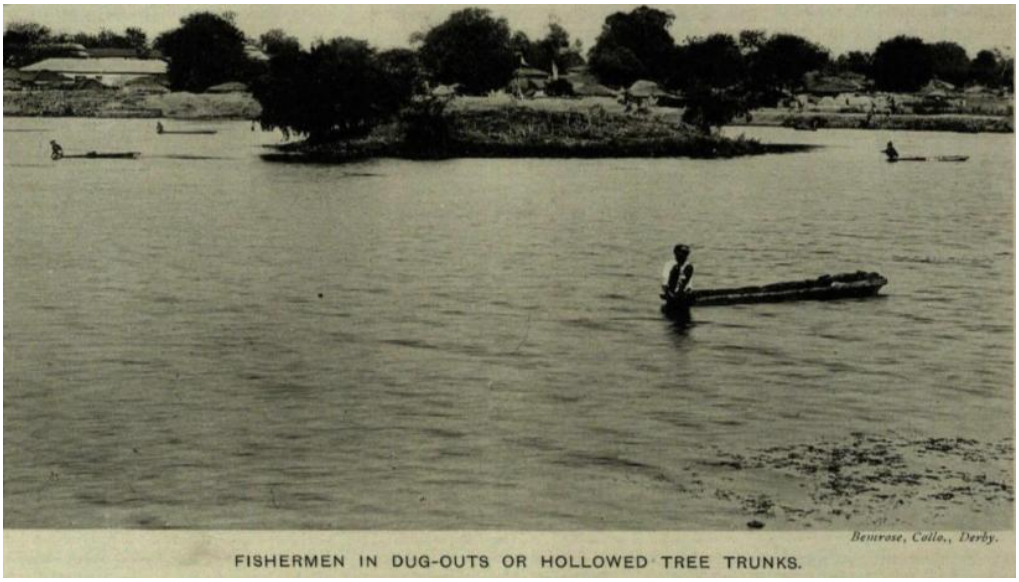

Figure 5: Dhiwar fishermen, as mentioned by Russell (1916)

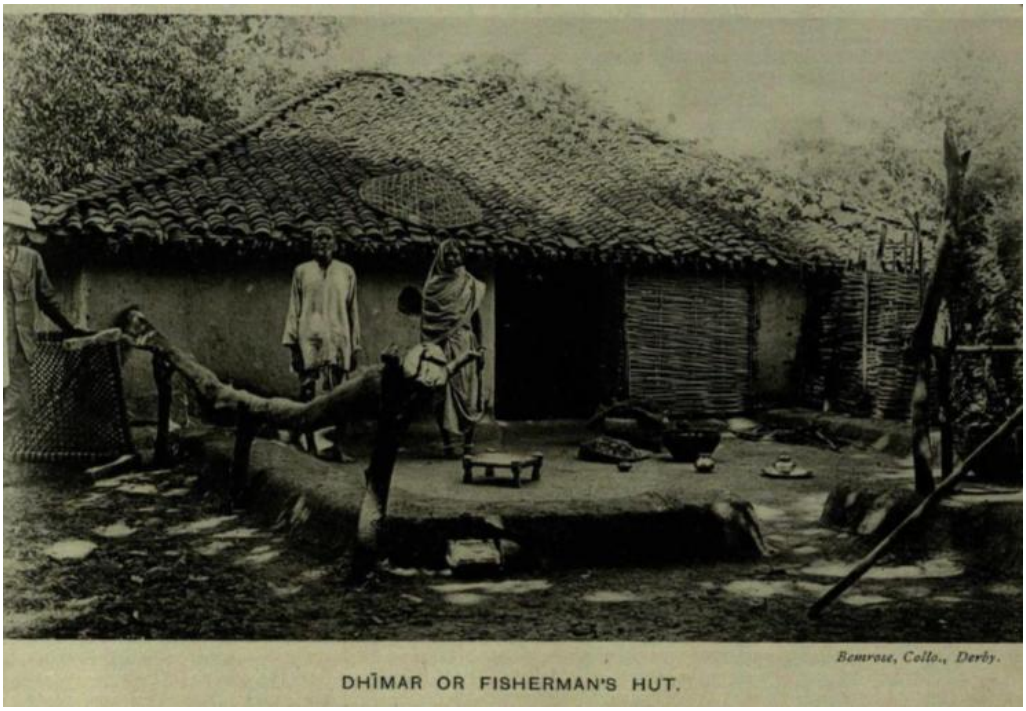

Figure 6: Hut of a Dhiwar family (Russell 1916)

When rivers overflow during the monsoon and fishing becomes nearly impossible, some members of the Dhiwar community turn to hunting. Traditionally, they hunted animals such as wild boar, deer, hare (rabbit), monitor lizard, and porcupine (locally called Sarang). They also hunted birds like *Bagla*, *Pan Kombdi* (water dove), *Titir*, *Lava*, *Dhokri*, *Chitrunga*, and *Bhovri*.

Women of the Dhiwar community have always played an important part in maintaining the household economy. They help in catching fish, drying and roasting them, and selling them in local markets. During the month of August, they sell wild brown rice for the festival of Rishi Panchami. In the winter season, they sell *Singhade* (water chestnuts) and *Mur-mure* (puffed rice). Their work supports the family income and adds to the community's social and cultural strength.

Changes and Continuity in Fishing Practices

Over time, the traditional fishing practices of the Dhiwar community have undergone many changes due to modernization, environmental issues, and government restrictions. Earlier, fishing was mainly done to sustain daily life

and meet family needs. Today, however, it has become a commercial activity, with many community members fishing for profit. This shift has affected both the ecological balance of the rivers and the natural fish population.

The younger generation, in particular, has adopted modern and sometimes harmful techniques such as using bleaching powder and electric rods for fishing. These methods may provide quick results, but are destructive to aquatic life. The older generation recalls a time when fishing was done with care and respect for the environment, using locally made tools and natural materials.

Traditional craftsmanship, such as weaving fishing nets at home, is now slowly disappearing. In the past, Dhiwar fishermen made their own nets and used eco-friendly materials, such as tree stems served as floaters, and clay beads were used as sinkers. Today, these are replaced by plastic, tin (locally called *katil),* and other synthetic materials that are cheaper and easily available in the market.

Hunting, which once served as an alternative livelihood during the monsoon season, has almost vanished due to government laws, urban expansion, and loss of forest areas. Despite all these changes, some of the old fishing techniques and ecological knowledge are still practiced by the older members of the community. Their understanding of water levels, fish movement, and seasonal rhythms continues to guide the younger fishers, even if only in part.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Aspects of the Dhiwar Community

The Dhiwar community maintains a rich cultural and religious life that reflects both their deep connection with nature and their belief in folk traditions. They are primarily devotees of Lord Mahadev (Shiva), and many of their rituals and legends are associated with him. One popular local story tells of Lord Shiva visiting a fisherman in disguise to test his honesty. When the fisherman lied, Shiva cursed him and his community, saying they would never feel fully satisfied, no matter how many fish they caught. This legend continues to be told within the community and is closely linked to their beliefs about work, honesty, and destiny.

Along with Mahadev, the Dhiwars also worship *Guru Dev*, considered a local or formless version of Shiva. During the month of August, they celebrate a festival known as *Khana* (खन). For this ritual, a small mound *(pind)* made of turmeric is prepared to represent Lord Shiva. Traditional dishes such as *bhaji*, *dal vada*, *kanda bhaji*, and *puri* (locally called *pati)* are offered to the deity. Later, these items are mixed together and distributed as *kauri (prasad)* among family members and neighbours, symbolizing unity and sharing.

Another major ritual is the *Beej* or *Narayan Puja*, celebrated in the winter months. This festival is centered around the worship of the folk deity *Waghoba*

(the tiger god). Traditionally, a wild boar was sacrificed as an offering to fulfil vows made by devotees. If a person's wish came true, they would catch a young boar and raise it as part of the family until it matured. During the festival, the animal was sacrificed, and the meat was cooked and shared among all participants. People spent the day singing, dancing, and playing traditional games. The bones and remains of the sacrificed animal were buried near the household shrine (*Devghar*) and worshipped later.

Though deeply symbolic of their tribal heritage and close bond with nature, this ritual has become rare today due to legal restrictions and changing social attitudes.

Other religious customs are observed during weddings. Among these are *Dulha Dev Puja* and *Anganbai Puja*. In *Dulha Dev Puja*, a rooster *(kombda)* is sacrificed near the household shrine, while in *Anganbai Puja*, a hen *(kombdi)* is sacrificed in the courtyard. Both rituals are performed privately by men, and the sacred space is enclosed with a long cloth called *Pasodi*, which, interestingly, is the same type of cloth used in fishing. These customs, though less common today, still represent the community's continuing belief in the connection between livelihood, ritual purity, and divine blessings**.**

Analysis and Conclusion

The ethnographic study of the Dhiwar community reveals their deep and enduring connection with rivers and the natural environment. Their traditional fishing knowledge, built through generations of observation and experience, reflects a strong understanding of ecology and seasonal rhythms. Fishing, for them, is not only an occupation but also a way of life that blends practical skill, cultural belief, and respect for nature.

With time, however, this balance has begun to change. Modern technologies, shifting environmental conditions, and new government regulations have gradually altered their traditional practices. The use of plastic materials and harmful fishing methods, such as electric rods and bleaching powder, has affected the natural ecosystem and reduced the value of indigenous techniques. The community now faces the challenge of maintaining its cultural identity while adapting to changing circumstances.

Despite these transformations, some aspects of traditional life remain strong. Women, in particular, continue to play a vital role in both household and economic activities. Their involvement in fishing, processing, and selling, as well as in family rituals and festivals, has helped preserve parts of the old lifestyle. The Dhiwar women represent the strength and continuity of the community's cultural foundation.

Religious faith and folk traditions still form an essential part of their social identity. The worship of deities such as *Mahadev*, *Guru Dev*, and *Waghoba*

demonstrates the blending of tribal and Hindu beliefs. Though many of these rituals are now performed less frequently, they continue to hold symbolic importance in expressing the community's bond with nature and spirituality.

In conclusion, the Dhiwar community stands as a strong example of how traditional societies evolve over time while striving to protect their cultural roots. Documenting their knowledge and practices is crucial for understanding the diversity of India's cultural and ecological heritage. Such ethnographic documentation not only preserves disappearing traditions but also provides valuable insights for future anthropological and ethnoarchaeological studies, especially as rapid modernization continues to reshape rural and tribal communities across the country. In years to come, this recorded knowledge may serve as a bridge to the past, helping scholars trace the evolution of human societies and their relationship with the natural world.

Acknowledgement:

I am sincerely grateful to the members of the Dhiwar community in Nagpur who welcomed me with warmth and shared their stories, experiences, and knowledge during my fieldwork. Their openness and cooperation made this study meaningful and allowed me to understand their traditions and everyday realities more closely.

I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to my family and friends for their constant encouragement, patience, and support throughout this research journey. Their faith in me has been a continuous source of motivation.

This work is dedicated to all those who strive to preserve traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, ensuring that the voices and wisdom of communities like the Dhiwars continue to be remembered, respected, and valued for generations to come.

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