

Human-Nature Interface in Kokna Tribe

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Abstract

Human interaction, in its varied aspects, with Nature has been significant in human evolution. It exhibits delicate, complementary, severe and destructive phases of interaction. The ways of interaction may differ among communities. Nonetheless, the intensity of benefit is more inclined towards humans. Every moment of human life in one way or the other interacts with the Nature for mutual benefits. When threatened, humans bring in the cultural practices that they think would help them get rid of natural threats, or at least minimize their impact. It is more evident with people living close to Nature. In situations of calamity and happiness both these people bring in practices of gratitude towards Nature. Presumably, such interactions help them develop wisdom to appropriate their cultural practices aligned with Nature.

Kokna tribe located on the border lines of Maharashtra and Gujrat has evolved for generation some cultural practices, in the form of festivals, which help them, build a long lived and strong interface with Nature. In *Dongardev*, the annual festival which celebrates the Hill God for protecting the clan from possible difficulties is celebrated with worship, dance, and sacrifices. Besides, the tribe celebrates *Wagh dev* (Tiger God), *Nag Dev* (Snake God), *Kansari Mata* (Crop Deity), etc. These are major ones worshiped as a positive omen. The tribe worships *Khais*, *Ranava*, *Jugma*, *Jugniin*, etc. which form the group of evil spirits. The tribe holds this belief that in binary opposition where good exists bad accompany it. Thus, the tribe worships both to stay protected.

This paper explores the intricate relationship between humans and the nature through cultural practices within the Kokna tribe of Maharashtra, India. Through ethnographic insights, and cultural interpretation, it examines how the Kokna people conceptualize divinity, (*not God in its general sense of the term*) engage in ritual practices, and express spiritual beliefs through oral traditions and festivals. The study highlights the role of mythology, nature worship, and community rituals in shaping the tribe's spiritual worldview.

Key words: Tribe, Interface, Nature, Rituals, Culture

Introduction:

Maharashtra houses fourth largest population of tribal people in India. It is located in 14 districts of the state. The four districts; Nashik, Thane, Dhule and Nandurbar has the population of Kokna tribe. The census of 2011 documented the Kokna tribe population above four lakhs (4,33,999) in Nashik district and 6,87,431 in Maharashtra. Researchers and scholars of tribal studies and folklorology prefer titles like *Adivasi*, *Vanvasi*, *Aborigines*, etc. to identify a group of people with unique features of their own within a community, often alien from mainstream life style, more often than not found close to natural habitats. Primarily, the tribal population in Maharashtra comprises of *Bhill*, *Mahadev Koli*, *Malhar Koli*, *Varli*, *Kokna*, *Katkari*, *Thakar*, *Gavit*, *Gond*, *Kolam*, *Korku*, *Andh*, *Dhodiya*, *Pardhi*, etc. Among these, Kokna tribe is one of the dominant scheduled tribes in Maharashtra. Tribal consider themselves as the children of the Earth. They are naïve, nature worshippers and with acute sense of environment.

The tribe believes that it belongs to the clan of aborigines. This signifies the use of titles like *Adivasi*, living in the land since the beginning and *Vanvasi*; living in the forest as correlated terms to their evolution. Historians believe that Kokna tribe originally migrated from Ratnagiri. They were brought to protect the Gambhir Fort in Jawhar. During the Durgadevi Famine (1896 to 1408 AD), these people moved to other parts of the state primarily to Nashik, Nandurbar, Navapur, Mokhada and some parts of Gujarat. The tribe is identified as Kokna and Kokni in Nashik and Nandurbar districts respectively. The tribe borrowed its name from the region, kokan itself. The residents of kokan region are called as *kokni*, *Kokna*, *kokuna*. However, after migration the people settled elsewhere and the new settlements are called as kokan.

The Kokna tribe has evolved its rich culture in close communion with nature; trees, rivers, hill rocks, birds and animals. It is known for its spontaneity and simplicity in creation of folklore. The reader has to submerge in the socio- cultural context to understand this spontaneity. A rich manifestation of the folk mind and folk culture is seen through cultural practices of the tribe. Hallowell (1947), emphasized the functional and psychological aspects of studying tribal culture as frames of reference. With these frames, the study of folklore extends to the social context where it takes place, its participants and conditions contributing to this creation. *'A substantial body of folktales is more than the literary expression of a people. It is, in a very real sense, there ethnography which, if systematized by the student, gives a penetrating picture of their way*

of life' (Herskovitz, 1948). Cultural practices are not simply a form of amusement for the community. However, amusement, obviously, is one of the functions of it. Nevertheless, an apparent tale of humor may have a life governing wisdom deep into it.

The Kokna tribe commemorates its cultural practices for what Bascom (1981) suggests as four functions of folklore. Pedagogy, as the third one holds parallel significance across cultures. It functions to discipline the children, lullabies for very young ones encapsulated in good humor. In many non-literate societies, the information embodied in folklore is highly regarded in its own right. To the extent to which it is regarded as historically true, its teaching is regarded as important; and to the extent to which it mirrors culture, it professes '*practical rules for the guidance of man*' (Malinowski, 1926). In light of this discussion, this paper will broadly focus on the way in which the Kokna tribe has sustained ways of interaction with nature. The reflection of it in their festivals, rituals and songs would be discussed at length here.

Hypothesis:

The researcher assumes that tribal people of any nation have closest proximity with nature. Nature and tribal people live in communal spirit mutually befitting each other for the larger good of the humanity and nature. Thus, the researcher intends to proceed with the hypothesis that **Kokna tribe has developed cultural practices that build a strong interface with nature reflected through their designated festivals and rituals.**

Objectives

1. To identify the cultural practices (Festivals, rituals, and folksongs) of the Kokna Tribe.
2. To analyze and interpret these practices to know how there exists an interface between the tribe and nature.

Research Methodology

The present research is qualitative in nature. This uses descriptive and analytical methods of research. Content analysis formed the basis of its process of interpretation and reflection. Primarily, it included identification, collection, interpretation and analysis of the data more closely related to the festivals and rituals of the Kokna tribe. It also touched upon the cultural practices apart from religious one that contribute to their interaction with nature, the former being the part of the larger latter. The researcher has identified and used the data collection

tools and techniques that primarily comprises of survey of Kokna tribal population in Nashik district, review of published materials on folksongs, field work to have first-hand experience of the happenings in rituals and festivals, informal discussion with the members of the tribe. The collected data is then analysed with the content analysis as a method of data analysis.

Folksongs: Human- Nature Interface

The Kokna tribe takes pride in being the king of jungles. They believe their existence on the earth dates back to times immemorial. Furthermore, they assume that they have been the part of the jungle since the beginning of the universal symbols like the Sun, the Moon calling themselves as *Vanvasi*. In the following folksong, (Joshi, 1976, p.45), the speaker tries to establish the evolutionary traces of the tribe.

आमी जंगलचं राजं वनवासी
आम्ही चांद-सुरया पासून आदिवासी //
आमी वरोली नदीचं गरली
आमी काळूमाय नदीच कोळी //
आमी दंडक आरण्याचं भोली
इंठ तिठ ही गाणं बोली //
आमी नाईक, डावर, कासवडी ठाकर
आमचा पूरवज होता वालमीक रुषी //"

We are the kings of the forest, the forest dwellers.
We are indigenous since the Sun and the Moon.
We are the Warli of the Varoli river,
We are the Koli of the Kalunai river.
We are the Bhoali of the Dandakaranya,
Sing here and there.
We are Naik, Davar, Kasavdi, Thakar
Our ancestor was the sage Valmiki.

The dialect of the tribe has similar words like Marathi. However, phonological and orthographical features are slightly different. In this folksong, the speaker uses exclusive nature imagery to focus the evolution of the tribe. It uses metaphors like jungle, the Sun, the Moon, varli river, aranya (forest), etc. and correlate the tribe's evolution with the existence of these natural resources. Primarily, the tribe takes the nature in its varied forms as the dwelling place for generations. Moreover, the tribe also incorporates other tribes like *varli, koli, thakar, davar, and naik* as these tribes coexisted from the times of the Walmik Rishi.

Similarly, the Kokna tribe holds utmost respect for every minutest component of nature. Pay tribute and express gratitude to nature in the form of deity forms its perspective of looking at nature as an integral part of life. The earth is celebrated as mother and due honour to it is scripted for generations. The reader can find it evident in the following folksong (Deshmukh, 2020, p.16) where the tribe pays tribute to mother earth.

आठ नाचू का कोठ रं नाचू
धरतरेचे पाठीवर
धरतरी माजी माय रं
तिल मी पाय कसा लाकू रं

Where shall I dance, here or there?
On the back of the Earth?
The Earth is my mother –
*How can I place my feet on her?*²

There is a conversation in this song. The speaker expresses his/her willingness to dance, however, intrigued by the question as to how he/she can touch the mother earth since it is his/her mother. Our civilization equals mother with that of a deity. In this context, the speaker finds it difficult to touch the earth with his/her feet. It is customary in Kokna culture where after getting up from bed and before putting their feet on the ground, the people touch it and make it to forehead as respect to mother earth. This emotional bond with the earth has been in the tradition of the Kokna tribe.

Traditionally, the tribe has developed a sense of gratitude towards nature. It has its own unique beliefs and techniques of nature protection and conservation. The people pay tribute and express gratitude to Nature before all auspicious beginnings. Agriculture, being the primary occupation for living, the tribe keeps nature at the centre of all activities of life. In the first line of the following folksong (Deshmukh, 2020, p. 299), the tribe knows for generations how useful mango and tamarind trees are for the benefit of the tribe.

पुढऱ्या दारी अंबा, मागऱ्या दारी चिच वं गवराई	<i>Mango at the front, tamarind at the back, oh Gavarai!</i>
करसेचा धान पिरला / मकेचा धान पिरला वं गवराई	<i>What grain did you sow? Of corn, oh Gavarai!</i>
करसेचा धान पिरला / वाकीचा धान पिरला वं गवराई	<i>What grain did you sow? Of millet, oh Gavarai!</i>
नागलीचा धान पिरला वं गवराई/ भाताचा धान पिरला वं गवराई	<i>Of millet, oh dear Gavarai! Of rice, oh Gavarai!</i>

In natural habitat of the Kokna people, a typical Kokna hut has a mango tree in front and a tamarind tree at the back. Traditionally, the trees are believed to be the symbols of abundance and flavor respectively. This song perpetuates the feeling of the people where 'Gavrai; a goddess of grains is worshiped before sowing the seeds. The people keep seven grains in a wooden container for seven days and worship the Gavrai to make the grains of superior quality which they can sow in the fields. They believe that the grains have the blessing of the Gavrai. The song is a dialogue between the people and the Gavrai where they ask the latter what to sow in the field. The people finds a way to be in communication with the Gavrai that is in the form grains nurtured by nature.

Here is another folksong that establishes a way to communicate with nature. The song delineates the forms of deities that tribal people worship in their daily life. This folksong features at the beginning of all auspicious things including agriculture processes, festivals, and rituals (Deshmukh, 2020, p. 307).

‘पयला नमन माजा धनतारं मातेलं धनतारी मातेलं हो
दुसरा नमन माजा कणसरी मातेलं कणसरी मातेलं हो
तिसरा नमन माजा मारवती देवलं मारवती देवलं हो
चतुर्था नमन माजा पानदेवालं इज का गाजलं हो

*First I salute Dhanatari Mata,
Second I salute Kansari Mata,
Third I salute to Maravati Deval,
Fourth I salute Pandev,
whose fame echoes far and wide.*

This folksong establishes a sequence of the deities to be worshipped that are closely associated with agriculture and nature. Dhantari is a goddess associated with wealth and prosperity. Kansari is a goddess that symbolizes the goddess of grains, representing agricultural abundance and nourishment. Marvati (Hanuman) is a worshipped for protection, blessings, and community well-being. Pandev is a god of water which is an essential prerequisite of agriculture. The song reflects a spiritual connection between rural communities and nature, where deities are invoked to bless the land, crops, and the people.

Festivals: Human- Nature Interface

The Kokna tribe has two types of deities. First is Nature Deity and second is Food Deity. The types are self-explanatory to show how the tribe is closely knitted with the happenings in nature for their survival. In former type, hills, rocks, animals, birds, the sun, the moon are solicited for blessings. Upcoming discussion has, at its centre, the festivals of the Kokna tribe wherein people come together as a community to celebrate festivals to strengthen their bond with the nature. I have discussed, here three festivals namely *Bohada* (Mask Drama), *Pola* (Bull worship), and *Dongardev* (Hill God).

Bohada (Mask Folk Dance)

Festival: Bohada

Bhovada/Bhavada as it is called commemorates the folk dance of the tribe that dates back to 200 years. It takes place in the month of March/April. It is a form of dance done by wearing masks. The festival lasts for 7-8 days. The villagers prepare a ground at the centre of the village and make all the necessary arrangement for the artists to perform the dance. The origin of this dance correlates with the stories of ancestors who used to hunt tiger and wear its skin to the village to showcase bravery. Moreover, there has been a tradition to have procession of deities. The mask of the deity is put on by a person, and he dances to the beats of the music. It seems that dance is the primary concern of this festival. In the course of time, the stories from Ramayan and Mahabharat got their place in the mask dance. These masks are exclusively for showcasing the stories where evil force is defeated and eternal truth upholds.



*Figure 1



*Figure 2

The dance festival comprises of around 25-30 masks of deities, demons, and characters from the daily life of the Kokna people. Other characters include vendors, brahmin, goldsmith, etc. and relative performances take place to entertain the audience. One of the most famous stories of the bohada dance is of Goddess Durga killing the demon Mahishasur. Nevertheless, only men are allowed to take part in this dance. The artists dance to their utmost capacity not just to entertain people but it seems to them a service to the community in preserving the folkdance for next generations. The villagers need to invite with due respect these artists for performances.

Bailpola (Pola)

Festival: Pola

Pola is a festival of farmers celebrated mostly in Maharashtra, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. The festival commemorates the contribution of bulls and other animals in agricultural activities. The tribe celebrates it with utmost enthusiasm and joy. First, the farmer takes the bulls to the river for a holy bath in the presence of his clan deity. Then, he decorates the bulls with different colours, paints specific names of the bulls, and tie balloons to their horns. After decorating the bulls, they are taken to the temple of the clan deity where all villagers bring their bulls. The crowd gathers here to cheer up the farmers. Some farmers even make the bulls dance to entertain the crowd. The more attractive the bulls, more honour they bring to the farmer. The pair of bulls is taken at home where a woman worships them and offer the bulls a sweet to eat. This day, the bulls have a holiday. The bulls are not engaged into farming activities

of any kind. It is even practiced that on this day, farmers would not beat/say abusing words to the bulls.



*Figure 3

It is the day of gratitude towards bulls for their crucial contribution in the lives of the tribe. The tribe honestly live up this day. In modern times, difficult it is practically to maintain a pair of bulls, many farmers resort to use machinery, the tribe still holds the belief that if you cultivate your land with the help of bulls it nurtures and makes huge quality production of crops. Around us, normalization is taking place of inhuman actions where the tribal people has the wisdom to treat animals/other beings with due respect and recognize their contribution over and again. Here are a few lines from a folksong (Deshmukh, 2020, p. 310) about the gratitude towards the bulls;

कुलमी दादा आहे तुजा डोंगराल शोत, डोंगराल शोत बईल घालतोय मोट,
कुलमी दादा रं तू नको मार बईलाल, नको मार बईलाल माजे पाठीचे भावाले.



*Figure 4

where a woman thinks the bulls belong to her kinship. She further adds, not to beat the bulls as they are my younger brothers. They help you toil your fields which are at the foot of the hill.

Dongardev (Hill God)

Festival: Dongaryadev

As the name suggest, the festival celebrates the hills and allied natural resources for providing shelter to the tribe. The tribe celebrates Dongardev, the annual festival in the month of November. The festival lasts for 8-10 days. Dongardev is a god of abundance, happiness and safety from all natural and man-made disasters. Interestingly, Dongardev does not have a traditionally found idol, neither it has a temple constructed for it. It is all about the whole hill, mountain and valley. Significantly, it is the Nature that the tribe worships. It is the form of communion among people. The life of the tribe is surrounded by hills, mountains and valleys. The tribe holds this belief that these hill, mountains and valleys help sustain their life against all

natural calamities. It is to express gratitude to them through worship that makes the festival unique.



*Figure 5

At least one member of each family should be a part of procession of Dongardev. Around 70-80 people (*Maulya*) actively participate in various activities designated in the festival. The festival consists of dance, worship, and stories. Moreover, the people sing an epic song continuously for 7-8 days wherein they elaborate on the origin of the tribe, origin of the deities, and their significance. While listening to the epic song, the active participants are believed to hold the spirit of the god. The spirit then dances with utmost fervor for hours. Women worship the young boys who hold the spirit. Eventually, the *Maulya* go to the top of the hill and worship Dongardev, express gratitude for their wellbeing. The festival focuses on community engagement, preserve cultural practices of the tribe, and orally transmit these practices to next generation.



*Figure 6

Rituals: Human- Nature Interface

Wagh Dev (Tiger God)

Ritual-Waghbaras

Waghya dev (Tiger God) as called by the tribe is situated at the East side of the village where there is an utmost probability of the tiger entering a village. In this ritual, a shape of the tiger is carved on a piece of wood, along with other nature symbols like peacock, the sun, the moon, and snake. Only men can participate in enshrining the tiger god. In the midnight, all men take the statue of the tiger god and make a procession around the village in semi-nude status. The experienced person establishes the statue that faces East.



*Figure 7

The men worship the god by saying *you are our protector*. Ironically, the tribe worships tiger as a god who is known for hunting the livestock of the tribe. In modern times, people resort to adapting strategies to get rid of wild animals. However, the tribe hold this notion that it is the natural habitat of tiger. It is tiger's home. We are encroaching into it. Thus, we must request/worship him for coexistence. Moreover, the tribe respect tiger since it is the *vahana* of the Hindu goddess, Durga.

Chira (Ancestors)

Ritual: Sarvpitri Amavashya

Chira is the ritual where the carved stones in the memory of the ancestors are enshrined on the borderline of the field. The tribe believes the dead ones of the family as clan gods. The stones in the memory of each of the ancestor is situated on the field with this assumption that these ancestors look after the fields and help the family reap good crops. They also protect the field and the family from danger which is unforeseen by the family. These stones are exclusive for the person; male, female, and children. Where the number of ancestor increases, the family carve all of them together in a stone. These ancestors are worshiped throughout a year but the day of *Sarvpitri Amavashya* in September each year is exclusive for the ancestors. This is the season of monsoon so; all the fields are full with different crops and vegetables. People believe that it is the blessing of their ancestors.



*Figure 8

On this occasion, the fresh vegetables from the fields are brought for the ancestors. The cooked vegetables are kept on the roof for the ancestors to eat who, the people believed come in the form of a crow. The people eat only after the crow (ancestors) eats a morsel. If a crow does not turn up, the people believed that they must have committed some crime/illegal activity which the ancestors are not happy with. In such time of modernity that brings extreme stress, decreasing human sense, depressing events, the people take pride in looking after their ancestors.

Aai Mauli (Clan Deity)

Ritual: Pandev

This deity is in the form of stones wherein the rocks at the side of the river have dotted stones with red colour. These small stones are unique in form. Neither are they small nor big. The deity is a clan deity whom every family of the tribe worships in the form of *Annadevata*. There is no specific day when the clan deity is worshiped. Generally, in auspicious activities like *pachvi, baras, jaul, marriage, and dushera*, the tribe worships to get blessings of growth and protection.



*Figure 9

The tribe believes that water is the elixir of life. It is to be protected and used well. River is the only form of water available to them. It suffices all the purposes of daily life. Thus, the tribe has developed this wisdom of worship the source of water. Consequently, the tribe has made the place around the river from where they get potable water a sacred place. No form of impurity is then allowed there since it is a sacred place of worship. This ensures a clean source of potable water available to all the beings including humans.

Naagdev (Snake God)

Ritual: Naagpanchami

Living in jungles, the tribe always is mesmerized by the mysterious forces of nature. Snake is one of them who they believed is the messenger of the supernatural. Human beings resort to worship those natural forces upon which they cannot exercise domination. With the sense of fear of the mighty forces, the tribe resorts to adapt the principle of coexistence. The agility of the snake, its speed, appearance and the power of being deadly poisonous mesmerizes us. Snake has a direct embodiment of death. Thus, the tribe ensures mutual coexistence with snake bringing it into the frame of worship, with this belief that it would not be troublesome, at least if not provoked.



*Figure 10

Naag Panchami is celebrated in the month of *Shravan*. This season has full grown grass appears everywhere. Snakes also make this grass as their dwelling place. On the day of Naagpanchmi, married women keep fast in the name of Snake god. As shown in the above picture, a ritual where a snake image is created with the newly reaped rice in the middle and the dots around which symbolizes humans. The people believe that snake would move among the people without hurting anyone around, if they worship it in this form. Moreover, the women also paint pictures of snake on the walls and worship it. Interestingly, it used to be the practice in civilized societies to kill a snake where ever found since it poses a danger to human life. However, the tribe worships it in the form of a god and believes that it would not trouble us unnecessarily.

Conclusion

The Human-Nature interface in the Kokna tribe is a holistic and lived experience. It integrates nature, community and spirituality into a cohesive worldview. Interpreting this interface offers valuable insights into indigenous wisdom and the role of festivals and rituals in cultural resilience. The discussion focused on three aspects of human nature interface through which Kokna tribe interacts with nature for coexistence expressing mutual sense of respect and worship. The festivals like Bohada, Pola and Dongardev makes a strong statement of community engagement with nature. Moreover, nature symbols like the sun, the moon, stars, birds, animals form the arena of worship which helps the tribe ensure a consistent yet respectful bond between the tribe and nature. The ritual practices like Waghbaras, Chira, Naagpanchami, and Aai Mauli stresses the principle of coexistence with nature. This necessitates us to seriously think of practices of the civilized society that is seen falling into fragments over materialistic intentions.

The hypothesis presented yields a strong support through identifying and analysis of the folksongs, festivals and rituals of the Kokna tribe. Nowhere else can we find such a devotion to nature for generations. The interface is not for just some kind of celebration/rituals on certain occasions. It reflects an embodiment of practices as an integral part of tribal life.

The cultural practices of the tribe hold this belief of connected kinship with trees, plants, animals, birds, stones, hill, land. These aspects form the core part of their daily life which in turn support life on the earth. The generations have passed, the wisdom remained consistent with the Kokna tribe. In modern times, the tribe has witnessed changes in their practices, nevertheless, the essentials remain intact with this perspective that we (humans) need to adapt to the principle of coexistence with all aspects of nature; good or evil.

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