

The *Bhil Pradesh* Movement: From Historical Resistance to Contemporary Identity Political Propaganda

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Abstract:

The central tenet of a significant contemporary socio-political movement revolves around the ambitious proposal to establish a new, independent state to be known as 'Bhil Pradesh.' This proposed entity would be formed by meticulously carving out tribal-dominated districts primarily from four existing Indian states: Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. Proponents of this movement have meticulously identified and cataloged a substantial number of districts—a total of 49—that they envision consolidating into this new administrative unit. The vision behind Bhil Pradesh is often articulated by its supporters as a means to empower the indigenous Adivasi communities, particularly the Bhil tribe, by granting them greater political autonomy and control over their traditional lands, resources, and cultural heritage, aiming to address long-standing grievances related to marginalization, underdevelopment, and perceived neglect.

However, this movement is viewed with considerable suspicion and strong criticism by some detractors. From this critical perspective, the proposal for Bhil Pradesh is not merely a legitimate demand for regional autonomy but is characterized as a series of separatist activities. These activities are frequently attributed to or alleged to be spearheaded by communist elements or their sympathizers. The primary accusation leveled against these alleged orchestrators is that their true agenda extends beyond legitimate Adivasi empowerment and seeks to engineer significant demographic changes within the targeted regions. By consolidating Adivasi-majority areas into a single administrative unit, the goal, it is argued, is to create a distinct ethno-religious demographic bloc that could then be leveraged for specific political or ideological ends.

Furthermore, a grave concern articulated by opponents is the deliberate fostering of communal disharmony. It is alleged that these activities are designed to sow and exacerbate conflict between Adivasi communities and the broader Hindu population. This alleged strategy aims to fracture existing social cohesion by emphasizing differences, manipulating historical grievances, and creating an 'us vs. them' narrative, rather than promoting inclusive development. The overarching, ultimate purpose attributed to these perceived separatist and communist-backed endeavors, by those critical of the movement, is to destabilize the Indian nation, and more specifically, to particularly undermine the stability and integrity of key states like Gujarat and the wider Indian Union, potentially leading to internal security challenges, economic disruption, and political fragmentation.

Keywords: Bhil Pradesh, Communal Disharmony, narrative, political fragmentation, social fracture.

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I. Introduction: From Resistance to Reassertion

This report provides an in-depth analysis of the Bhil Pradesh movement, a long-standing assertion of identity and rights by the Bhil community in western and central India. The Bhils, one of India's largest indigenous groups, have historically inhabited a contiguous, tribal-dominated belt that spans parts of present-day Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra¹. This geographical concentration forms the core of the movement's demand for a unified political entity—Bhil Pradesh—intended to consolidate Bhil identity and political power within a single administrative region.

While the roots of Bhil mobilization can be traced back to the Indian freedom struggle and early resistance to colonial and feudal domination, the contemporary movement has taken on more complex and politically charged dimensions. What began as a struggle for rights and recognition has, in recent years, been reframed by certain actors into a separatist agenda that risks undermining national unity. The demand for Bhil Pradesh³, in this context, is not just about administrative restructuring or tribal empowerment—it increasingly reflects an attempt to destabilize India's federal integrity by carving out a new state on ethnic lines. This has raised concerns among various stakeholders, especially given the movement's susceptibility to external influence, identity politics, and narratives that challenge the cohesion of existing states.

In Gujarat, where tribal populations have historically coexisted with broader Hindu communities, the Bhil Pradesh narrative poses a unique threat. By emphasizing tribal exclusivity and framing Bhil identity in opposition to dominant regional cultures, the movement risks disrupting the delicate balance of Hindu-Adivasi communal harmony¹⁰. Efforts to isolate Bhils culturally and politically from the larger Hindu framework can lead to divisions where none previously existed, fueling mistrust and polarizing communities that have long shared spaces, festivals, and local governance structures. This 'us vs. them' narrative, often promoted under the guise of indigenous rights, tends to exploit historical grievances without addressing the underlying issues of development and integration.

Ultimately, while the aspirations for tribal dignity and autonomy are valid and deserve a nuanced response, the current trajectory of the Bhil Pradesh movement risks becoming a tool for political fragmentation. It diverts attention from inclusive development, economic empowerment, and integration, and instead leans toward identity-based separatism—an approach that can destabilize not only the affected regions but also the broader fabric of Indian democracy.

Historical Genesis of Bhil Resistance (19th and Early 20th Centuries)

The history of the Bhil community is marked by a long and tenacious struggle against forces that sought to subjugate them and dispossess them of their land and rights.

The Early Colonial Uprisings (1818-1850s)

The Bhil Revolt of 1818 stands as one of the earliest recorded tribal uprisings against the British East India Company.⁶ The primary triggers for this rebellion were the Company's oppressive policies, which stripped the Bhil people of their traditional rights to forest resources and subjected them to new administrative and feudal systems. The British, in partnership with local princely states, interfered in the Bhils' internal affairs and imposed burdensome taxes, leading to widespread dissatisfaction.⁶ When the Bhils revolted, the British responded with military force, successfully stifling the initial opposition. However, this suppression backfired, fueling greater animosity and sustained resistance. The British forces found it challenging to penetrate the dense forests where the Bhil warriors utilized guerrilla tactics, preventing a complete end to the insurrection.³ This pattern of resistance continued, with renewed uprisings in 1825, 1831, and 1846, illustrating that the core issues of exploitation and loss of autonomy remained unresolved for decades.³ These early revolts established a lasting legacy of armed resistance driven by material grievances, highlighting the British failure to respect and understand the Bhil social and political systems.

The Rise of Socio-Political Movements

By the early 20th century, Bhil resistance evolved from localized armed revolts to organized socio-political movements under inspirational leadership.

Govind Guru and the Bhagat Andolan (c. 1900-1913)

A pivotal figure in this era was Govind Guru, a social and religious reformer from southern Rajasthan.⁶ His Bhagat Andolan was a multi-faceted movement that sought to uplift the Bhil community from within. Guru encouraged the Bhils to embrace self-respect, abandon social vices such as non-vegetarianism and alcohol use, and fight against bonded labor.⁶ He was instrumental in raising the political consciousness of the Bhil community and uniting them to demand a separate entity, or at least greater autonomy, during the British period.⁶ His movement culminated in one of the most tragic and defining events in Bhil history.

The Mangarh Massacre of 1913

On November 17, 1913, British soldiers and forces from princely states attacked an assembly of over 1,500 unarmed Bhil followers of Govind Guru at Mangarh Hill on the Rajasthan-Gujarat border.¹ The ensuing massacre, which took place six years before the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, is often referred to as the "Adivasi Jallianwala Bagh".¹ This tragic event is not merely a historical footnote; it serves as a foundational historical and political symbol for the contemporary Bhil Pradesh movement. Modern leaders use the Mangarh legacy as their moral compass and historical bedrock. The annual rallies and yatras held at Mangarh Dham by parties like the BAP are not just acts of commemoration but are a deliberate use of this historical memory to mobilize support and legitimize their demand as a continuation of a century-old struggle for tribal rights and dignity.¹⁰

Motilal Tejawat and the Eki Movement (1920s)

Following Govind Guru, Motilal Tejawat emerged as another significant leader, spearheading the Eki Movement in the 1920s across the Adivasi-dominated border areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat.⁸ Tejawat, who was inspired by the Bijolia peasant movement, mobilized large gatherings of Adivasi peasants at fairs and other public events to protest against

begar (forced labor) and unfair taxation.⁴ He presented 21 demands to the Maharana of Mewar, who conceded some, but critically, rejected three major demands related to forest rights, namely the collection of wood and grass, and hunting rights.⁹

The Eki Movement is a crucial case study in the relationship between tribal aspirations and the pan-Indian nationalist agenda. While Tejawat viewed his movement as part of the broader independence struggle and spoke of "Gandhi raj," mainstream leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi himself, publicly distanced themselves from his methods, accusing him of being surrounded by an armed crowd.⁹ This lack of support from the nationalist leadership is a profound historical factor. It illustrates the early fissures between tribal self-determination and the centralized goals of the Indian National Congress. This historical marginalization of Bhil concerns within the independence movement helped pave the way for the contemporary demand for a separate state as the ultimate means of achieving genuine self-determination and equitable development.⁹

The Post-Independence Demand for a Tribal Homeland

The demand for a separate Bhil homeland gained new political form in post-independence India, driven by the fragmentation of the Bhil heartland and the persistent failure of development policies.

The Division of a Contiguous Bhil Region

With the reorganization of Indian states after 1947, the historically contiguous Bhil-populated regions were divided across four separate states: Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra.¹ This administrative fragmentation is cited by proponents as a primary injustice, as it diluted the political and cultural unity of the Bhil community and led to a lack of focused governance for their specific needs.¹

The Bhil Pradesh Proposal

The core of the modern movement is the proposal to create a single state called 'Bhil Pradesh' by carving out tribal-dominated districts from these four states. Proponents of the movement have identified a total of 49 districts to be included in this proposed state.¹

The proposed districts for 'Bhil Pradesh' are as follows:

State	Proposed Districts
Gujarat	Aravalli, Mahisagar, Dahod, Panchmahal, Surat, Vadodara, Tapi, Navsari, Chhota Udaipur, Narmada, Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, Bharuch ¹⁸
Rajasthan	Banswara, Dungarpur, Barmer, Jalore, Sirohi, Udaipur, Jhalawar, Rajsamand, Chittorgarh, Kota, Baran, Pali ¹⁸
Madhya Pradesh	Indore, Guna, Shivpuri, Mandsaur, Neemuch, Ratlam, Dhar, Dewas, Khandwa, Khargone, Burhanpur, Barwani, Alirajpur ¹⁸
Maharashtra	Nashik, Thane, Jalgaon, Dhule, Palghar, Nandurbar ¹⁸

The Rise of Regional Tribal Parties

The demand for Bhil Pradesh has found a powerful political vehicle in the form of regional tribal parties. The Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP), founded in 2017 by Chhotubhai Vasava, was the first to formalize this demand in the political sphere.¹ The BTP achieved initial electoral success, winning two seats in Gujarat in 2017 and two in Rajasthan in 2018.¹⁹ However, a split in the party led to the formation of the Bharat Adivasi Party (BAP) in September 2023.¹

The BAP, led by Rajkumar Roat, has seen a rapid and significant rise in influence. The party won three seats in the 2023 Rajasthan Assembly elections and one seat in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly elections.²⁰ Its most notable achievement came in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections when Rajkumar Roat won the Banswara constituency, bringing the demand for Bhil Pradesh to the national stage.¹⁵ The evolution from BTP to BAP and the latter's electoral success signals a profound shift; the movement has transitioned from a social protest to a potent electoral force. The BAP's ability to win seats in multiple states and its strategic alliance with the I.N.D.I.A. bloc demonstrates a newfound political pragmatism and a capacity to leverage its numerical strength for greater influence on the national stage.²⁰

The Underlying Drivers and Contemporary Dynamics

The contemporary movement is not driven by historical grievances alone but is fueled by deep-seated socio-economic and cultural issues that persist to this day.

Socio-Economic Marginalization as a Catalyst

The demand for statehood is fundamentally a response to a sustained development deficit in Bhil-dominated regions.⁵ A look at socio-economic indicators reveals a stark reality of marginalization. The literacy rate among Bhils is significantly lower than the national average.⁵ The community also faces numerous health challenges, including malnutrition and high infant mortality rates, often due to a lack of access to proper healthcare facilities.⁵

The struggle for "JAL, JUNGLE, JAMEEN" (water, forest, and land) remains a central theme. Historically, Bhils were dispossessed of their ancestral lands by colonial policies and, in the post-independence era, by government declarations of "reserved forests" and development projects.¹⁷ This land alienation, coupled with issues like inadequate irrigation, illegal mining, and lack of market access for their agricultural and forest produce, has left the community economically vulnerable.⁵ The delayed and ineffective implementation of laws like the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, which was designed to decentralize governance and empower tribal areas, is cited as a clear example of institutional neglect.¹ The movement argues that the creation of a separate state is the only pragmatic solution to ensure the focused development and equitable distribution of resources that have been denied to them for decades.

Cultural and Identity Assertion

Beyond socio-economic issues, the Bhil Pradesh movement is a battle for cultural self-determination. The Bhils have a rich and vibrant cultural heritage, with unique traditions, art forms like Pithora painting, and their own spiritual beliefs.⁴ However, their identity has been contested and subjected to historical assimilation. While some Bhils identify as Hindus, and some have been converted to Christianity or Islam, a growing number of activists are asserting a distinct Adivasi identity separate from Hinduism.⁴ This is reflected in statements by leaders who say, "We are not Hindus" and encourage the community to reject symbols of assimilation like *Ghoonghat* and *Mangalsutra*, which they view as products of external influence.¹⁵ This political demand is thus inextricably linked to a spiritual and cultural revival that seeks to reclaim and preserve a unique indigenous heritage but the political propaganda behind it is to cultivate thoughts for separatism, fractured society.

The Political and Constitutional Debate

The demand for Bhil Pradesh has sparked intense political reactions, revealing a strategic battle over the narrative surrounding regional autonomy, tribal rights, and national integrity. On one hand, proponents argue that the creation of Bhil Pradesh is a necessary step toward recognizing the historical marginalization of Adivasi communities and empowering them through self-governance as its constitutional demand. On the other hand, critics view the movement with deep suspicion, interpreting it as a politically charged, potentially separatist agenda that threatens national unity. This divide has led to heightened tensions, with various political factions, activists, and interest groups vying to control the discourse and shape public perception.

Arguments for and Against Statehood

Proponents of Bhil Pradesh, led by figures like MP Rajkumar Roat, frame their demand as a constitutional right, citing Article 3 of the Constitution.¹⁰ They argue that the proposed state satisfies multiple criteria for state reorganization, including cultural and linguistic homogeneity, geographic contiguity, and the need to address underdevelopment and inequitable resource distribution.¹⁰

Conversely, opponents, primarily from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have condemned the movement in strong terms. They have called the demand "treason" and a "shameful and unfortunate political stunt" that threatens national unity.¹⁰ Opponents accuse proponents of promoting divisive agendas left behind by the British and the Church, arguing that the sacrifices of the Mangarh martyrs were for India's unity, not separatism.¹⁶ This debate highlights a fundamental clash over framing: BAP is forcing a discussion on constitutional rights and developmental justice, while its opponents are using rhetorical tools of "treason" and national unity to delegitimize the movement without addressing its root causes.

Electoral Performance of the BAP and BTP

The electoral data below provides a clear picture of the movement's growing political influence and its shift from a peripheral protest to a legitimate political force.

Election Year	Party	Seats Won (Rajasthan Assembly)	Seats Won (Madhya Pradesh Assembly)	Seats Won (Lok Sabha)	Political Alliance
2017	BTP	-	-	-	JD(U) (pre-poll); standalone (post-poll) ¹⁹
2018	BTP	2	-	-	Joined Indian National Congress government ¹⁹
2023	BAP	3	1	-	I.N.D.I.A. (2024 election) ²⁰
2024	BAP	-	-	1	I.N.D.I.A. ²⁰

II. Conclusion:

From this vantage point, the demand for Bhil Pradesh is viewed not as a genuine grassroots movement for Adivasi empowerment but as a strategically engineered campaign with deeper, more insidious objectives. Critics argue that behind the veil of tribal rights and regional autonomy lies a calculated effort to redraw demographic boundaries and sow discord within the national fabric. Allegations persist that the movement is being ideologically influenced, and in some cases materially supported, by external forces—including foreign-funded organizations with vested interests in destabilizing internal unity. By concentrating Adivasi-majority regions into a singular ethno-political bloc, these orchestrators aim to create a separatist stronghold that can be politically mobilized in opposition to national interests. Consequently, the Bhil Pradesh movement, through this lens, is not merely a regional aspiration but a veiled attempt at ethno-political separatism, potentially abetted by international actors seeking to fragment the Indian state under the guise of social justice.

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