

Celebrating Ravan

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In Paraswadi, Gond festivities begin with a procession of Ravan on an elephant float. Photo: Arunangsu Roy Chowdhury

It stands like the Trojan horse, clamped upon high iron wheels but sans the ominous boding of Greek subterfuge. A group of tribal men and women in colourful attire huddle around the 10-foot elephant next to a broken drain. While the Greeks used their horse to conquer the Trojans, this elephant made of grass and mud and a coat of paint, symbolises a cultural conquest of a different kind.

Evening is setting in and the air resonates with chants of Jai Seva! and Jai Gondwana! A few yards away, sheltered by a vividly coloured pandal, a two-and-a-half-foot tall idol of a man with striking features — his yellow face with a handlebar moustache — is the centre of all veneration. The deity wears a white kurta and a silky golden-yellow 'sela', the traditional Gond shawl. A 'sulla-shakti' crown adorns his head while a garland is placed around the neck. In Gond tradition, yellow signifies both creation and destruction, and is the definitive colour of the day. Some Gond elders assemble near the idol in obeisance, while a 'bhuma', the Gond priest, sprinkles rice grains and turmeric powder around the idol, uttering chants. Then in sync, everyone — men, women and children — bursts into a staccato of chanting, their arms flung into the air: Jai Gondwana! Jai Seva! Jai Raja Ravan! Raja Ravanna Seva!

Amid this chanting, the deity is carried out of the tent and carefully mounted on to his chosen 'vahan', the elephant. A Gond man, holding the idol tightly in his grasp, cautiously climbs a makeshift ladder and sits on the animal's back. Another round of chants ensues. Gond women gather around the elephant, singing Gondi songs, and take turns to bow before their lord. The next minute, drums start rolling and the procession sets into motion.

The wooden elephant moves slowly with its sacred ride, almost to the beat. The convoy ambles through the village, past a common tap, a few

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roofed mud huts, a shelf of Gondi religious literature, and some bullocks, and stops right where the fields begin, with the sunset providing a brilliant background. The ceremonial 'parikrama' is over, and the idol is reinstalled to its original spot, where a rainbow flag is now hoisted. The Trojan elephant is restored to its shed, motionless once more. The installation of Ravan, the Gond king, is complete, and marks the start of a 10-day festival that defies all mainstream Hindu mythology.

According to Hindu beliefs, Ravan is synonymous with evil. Each year, a 10-headed effigy of the King of Lanka is symbolically slain on Dussehra.

But not in Paraswadi. This tiny village of less than 300 people, mostly the Gond tribals, is one among several villages scattered across Central India that provide a different narrative to the Ravan story. Here, Ravan is not the villain. He is venerated as a god, the **dharmaguru** of the tribe.

Paraswadi is nestled in the heart of the Maoist-affected Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Like much of Gadchiroli, it finds itself on the extreme end of the development debate, bereft of basic amenities: the power supply is unreliable, the roads are run-down and there is not a single toilet. Yet on October 13, Paraswadi was lost in gaiety, forgetting its miserable existence. It was the inaugural day of this year's Ravan Mahotsav, an annual festival of the Gonds coinciding with the Hindu festival of Dussehra.

"Our understanding of Dussehra is different. It doesn't signify the slaying of Ravan but implies 'Dassar Puja', or the worship of weapons," says Vasudevrao Tekam, a descendant of the Gond king of Lanjigarh in Odisha. Tekam was among the many Gond guests present at the function. "We have nothing to do with Hinduism. Gonds believe in totems. We are the warisars of Ravan: Ravanvanshis. We are not Hindus. We are being forced to be Hindus..." Tekam's disowning of Aryan terminologies is indicative of the Gonds' counter-narrative.



[The villagers performing a puja for Ravan. Photo: Arunangsu Roy Chowdhury.](#)

According to their version, Ravan was a Gond king who was slain by Aryan invaders. He was the tenth *dharmaguru* of the tribe, carrying forward the legacy of Kupar Lingo, the supreme deity and heroic ancestor of Gonds, who gave them their phratry structures and lifestyle values. A clean-shaven young prince, Lingo's head is adorned by a trident-shaped crown, the 'munshul', representing his tri-fold philosophy of the head, heart and body, and flanked by the twisted horns of a bison. Lingo wears a dhoti, sports a kuda, and is said to play 18 musical instruments. If you travel into the interiors of Vidarbha, you can spot striking idols and markers of Lingo nestled in Gond territory or forests.



Getting the Lingo idol ready. Photo: Omar Rashid

Gonds, who believe in animism, consider Lingo and Ravan to be naturally just and environment-friendly deities. In fact, their narration of Ravan's story turns upside down the one in the [Ramayan](#). This includes a contention over the geographical location of Lanka, which Gonds believe is Madhya Pradesh's Amarkantak mountain. Various noted scholars in the last century, including H.D. Sankalia, have argued in favour of this theory.

"Lanka does not refer to Sri Lanka but means a 'hilly place' in Gondi. Ravan was connected to Central India. In a clash of cultures, the Aryans distorted Gond history. Ravan

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started only in 1838 in Nagpur. We have been worshipping Ravan for ages,” says Motiravan Kangale, a retired Reserve Bank of India official and Gondi scholar. Spurred by his opposition to the annual immolation of Ravan in his youth, Kangale had changed his name from Motiram to Motiravan.

Gond families place idols of Ravan and Lingo in their homes during this time. Mandsaur and Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, and Amravati in Maharashtra are some places where similar Ravan festivals have been recorded. Over the past few decades, however, coinciding with the rise of the Hindutva movement, the Ravan festival has acquired a sense of greater purpose — becoming a community’s movement to save its dying culture.

In fact, Ravan has become a rallying point for the Gonds to counter the onslaught of Hinduism and saffronisation, led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has an extended outreach among the tribals. In July 1991, during the heyday of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, gram panchayat teacher Maniravan Duga, 53, quit his job and dedicated his time to set up the Gondwana Gond Sanskriti Bachao Samiti (GGSBS). The small organisation has, for the past 24 years, organised Ravan Mahotsav in the region, to promote and preserve Gond culture.

Today, Ravan Mahotsavs are held in Maharashtra’s Gondia, Chandrapur, Bhandara, Gadchiroli and Amravati districts. “There’s a lot being said about Ravan. Brahmins claim he was one of them. But no Brahmin ever says that he is a Ravanvanshi. We Gonds are proud to say we are Ravanvanshis,” says Duga.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, among the grass roots workers engaged with the Gonds was Vira Sathidar, the Dalit activist known best for his lead role in the film *Court*, India’s official entry to the Oscars for 2016. In October 1989, when the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was gaining momentum, Sathidar participated in a ‘Ravan Vijay’ rally in Nagpur, to counter the annual Vijaya Dashami rally of the RSS. However, Sathidar and others were attacked by Hindutva activists. “The Ram Mandir movement was at its peak. The Gonds had begun to understand that they are not Hindus but Gonds, and that Hindutva forces were attacking their culture. As a reaction to the Hindutva movement, a counter [lobby] emerged among the Gonds in the form of Gondi *dharma sammelans*, of which I have participated in three,” says Sathidar. In solidarity with the Gonds, a few months later, Sathidar officially named his son Ravan.

A proto-Dravidian tribe, the second largest in the country, the Gonds feel that they have been victims of a historical injustice, especially after the split of the Gond-dominated areas among six new States in Central India after Independence. Not only has their history been ignored, their gods and heroes, and the roles of their freedom fighters in the 1857 uprising have also been largely ignored by mainstream discourse. Despite having at least 30 lakh Gondi speakers, there is no working script for the language and there is not a single government-appointed Gondi teacher in the country.

“Under the British, Gonds were acknowledged as indigenous people. Even officers appointed in Gond areas had to know Gondi. After independence, our cultural destruction gathered speed,” says Kangale, who has authored many books on Gond culture.

The Gonds believe their ‘cultural destruction’ has been expedited with the outreach of saffron forces into tribal realms. That thought took me to Mendra Lekha, which in 2011 became the country’s first village to secure community forest rights (CFR) guaranteed under the historic Forests Rights Act (2006). The first thing I am shown as I enter the village is the compound of the erstwhile ‘gotul’, the tribal centres of learning and cultural formation. Today, an Ekal Vidyalaya stands in its place. One among around 27,000 run by the RSS, the Ekal Vidyalayas are a network of single-teacher schools that focus on providing education to indigenous tribes. The Gonds, however, see them as an assault on their cultural values; a conspiracy to Hinduise them. Over 150 Ekal Vidyalayas have come up in Gadchiroli alone.

“They work like NGOs, luring young Gonds with financial benefits, and asking them to participate and teach at these schools. What they teach is Hindu culture. Even the government schools are steadily incorporating the language of Hindutva,” says Shyamkant Maravi, Maharashtra vice-president of the Gondwana Ganatantra Party. “When our children go to school, the culture of others is forced upon them. Our ‘sanskriti’ and legacies are being destroyed; kept out of the realm of education and discussion.” Ravan is said to belong to Shyamkant’s Maravi clan. Duga reiterates his concern: “The more educated tribal boys become, the less tribal (Gond) they remain.”

In Paraswadi, night falls and several Gond elders take the microphone to address the youth and caution them about the impending loss of their culture. In the middle of this, the power goes off. Only the stars provide light. In the crowd is Ashish Paroti, the village’s only graduate. He teaches at the village Ekal Vidyalaya and is paid Rs.1,500 per month. Paroti is apologetic about it, but has little choice. “I have nothing to do. So why not earn some money by teaching kids for a couple of hours?” he asks.

But at the cost of Gond culture? A smile is his only reply. His dilemma, sandwiched between the Maoists and the Hindutva forces, symbolises the quandary of the Gonds. In Ravan, they are searching for a totem to mobilise their cultural cohesion.

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