

A Relationship with seeds - the Paataalkot story (a translation)

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Specially translated for Vikalp Sangam (The original article ([Paataalkot mein Beejon ki Rishtedaaree](http://vikalpsangam.org/article/babamayaram-pataalkot-beej/#.XcKSgrkzZNA)) was SPECIALLY WRITTEN FOR VIKALP SANGAM see <http://vikalpsangam.org/article/babamayaram-pataalkot-beej/#.XcKSgrkzZNA>) An unusual programme on the Bhaariyaa tribal community and their relationship with seeds was under way in Paataalkot in Madhya Pradesh. Members of the Bhaariya Adivasi tribe are the primary savers of these traditional seeds which have all but vanished. They have rejuvenated these through exchange among farmers for cultivation. Paataalkot is located in the hilly Tamiya tehsil of Chhindwara district in Madhya Pradesh, about 75 km from Chhindwara city. It is bowl-shaped, and located in a 'deep' place as the word 'Paataal' in its name signifies. 'Kot' is a fort, indicating the lofty rock walls of the valley among the Satpuda mountain range. 12 villages are located in this deep tract of the valley, where it is said that the sun rises late, being obstructed by the high hills. To reach these low-lying villages and settlements, until recent years, visitors (including the present author) had to hang on to the roots of trees and lianas growing on the slopes to climb down to them, for there were no roads leading into the valley. Even today, no motorable roads have reached some of the settlements there. The dominant community residing here is the Bhaariya tribe. There are also some members of the Gond tribe. The twelve settlements in this region are Kaare-aam Raated, Chhintipur, Palaani Gaeldubba, Ghonghri Gujjadongri, Ghatlinga, Gudhichhatri, Ghaanaa Kodiya, Maalni Domni, Jadmaandal Harrakachhaar, Sehra Pachgol, Jhiran, and Sookhaa Bhand Haarmau. The Bhaariyas have been recognised as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), and the

Bhaariya Vikas Abhikaran

(Bhaariya Development Agency) was instituted for the purpose of their development. They speak the 'Paarsi' language, communicating with others in Hindi. Their major festivals include Deepavali, Holi and Harijirauti (Hariyali Amavasya), all associated with farming. The Bhaariyas' tradition thus belongs to the 'Krishi Sanskriti (Agricultural culture)'. To celebrate Divali, they wash their cows and bullocks, decorate them with peacock feathers and 'geru (natural red dye)' and colourful ribbons, and perform pujas – rituals to honour them. Their 'Pola' festival is celebrated by setting up and walking about on stilts ('*baans ki gedi*'), and preparing delicacies like '*thethra batiyaan*'. They create clay replicas of bullocks and worship them. '*Naagpanchmi*' is celebrated by worshipping cobras. '*Harijevti*' (New moon day celebrating Grass) is for pooja to celebrate and worship their fields, to pray for their fertility and for a good harvest. '*Holi*' is celebrated by singing all night to celebrate the harvest around a ritual bonfire. The Bhaariyas of Paataalkot are sometimes believed to be a strange people – cannibalistic, naked or scantily clad. But there is no truth in these beliefs. I spent over 24 hours with them in their homeland in the last week of January 2019, to attend the 'Beejon ki Rishtedaari' (relationship between people and seeds) programme, which was organized by non-profits Nirman and Using Diversity. I had been invited by Mr Naresh Vishvas, a social worker with long experience including work with the Baiga tribe of adivasis on seed conservation, and leader/ coordinator of the non-profit Nirman, for this programme. Our vehicle could take us to a point over a kilometer short of Sookhabhand settlement, for there is only a narrow path going into the hills beyond it. Baalkishan Bhaariya of Sookhabhand was our guide. We progressed over the uneven path through the forest, often obstructed by shrubs and bushes, climbing across certain sections, pausing now and again to catch our breath. It was evening by the time we reached Sookhabhand. It was chilly and the hills were wrapped in a blanket of fog. We saw livestock being lead back home. Relaxing by a bonfire, we chatted with the assembled Bhaariya people which included women and children and elders. Around 10 pm, a team of youth arrived with a 'Bada Kaandaa (large tuber, used as a food item)' – they had set off in the morning in order to obtain some. *Bhaariya Adivasi youth with wild tubers gathered from the forest* That night, we slept in Baalkishan's house, spreading our bedding on the floor in the Dehlan, and woke up to the sound of jingling bells hung around the neck of bullocks. We had breakfast made of the freshly harvested Bada Kaandaa, and set off on foot for Gaildubba, where the Beejon ki Rishtedaari programme was to be held. There was an exhibition of local, traditional seeds, food items prepared from them and a cultural programme. It was attended by men and women of many different villages, some of whom came by vehicle and others on foot. [Cultural programme as part of an exhibition of local, traditional seeds](#) The varied-coloured seeds, of unmatched taste, were exhibited in a pendal. Millets and legumes like beuri kutki ('kutki' is little millet), bhadel kutki, kangna (foxtail millet, very nutritive), kangni, madiya, baajra, kusmusi, bedabaa, tuar, kaala kaang, dhaan, saavaa, jagani, makka, etc. were all represented. Ballar (semie), barbata, neva and laal semaa were also exhibited. Schools kids viewing traditional seeds at the exhibition Among the dishes prepared out of the local seeds, there were *Mahua ka burka*, which is made out of coarsely ground *Jagni* and *Mahua*, which I, too, tasted, proved to be a favourite among the visitors. There was ghoonghrie made by cooking/ boiling *beda baal*. They had prepared *Daal* and *Bade* with *kusmusi*. *Kutki*, cooked and eaten with *daal* of *Ballar* is their staple. A watery soup, *Pej*, is also often prepared from *Kutki*. *Makka* or maize is ground into flour and used to prepare *Roti*, or cooked whole and eaten like rice.

Exhibition of local / traditional seeds Also exhibited was a wide variety of tubers – *Bada* (large) *Kaandaa* (tuber), *Maahli Kaandaa*, *set kaandaa*, *doonchi kaandaa*, *ke-oo kaandaa*, *kadu kaandaa*, *modo kaandaa*, *moosal kand* and *rated kaandaa*. In addition, they had exhibited a range of medicinal plants. There was *safed moosli*, *satavar* (*asparagus*), *ramdaataun*, *chirayataa*, *harra*, *baheda*, *amla*, *antmul* (prepared like tea), *bhilvaan*, etc. Munnalal of Sookhabhand Haarmau described the digestive qualities of *Modo Kaandaa*. The 'Taaseer' (general physiological effect) of *Bada Kaandaa* is heat-generating - '*Garam*'. It also suppresses hunger. *Set Kaandaa*, also *Garam*, is boiled and eaten. The Bhaariyas mostly use medicinal herbs to treat most of their ailments. They are very knowledgeable about these varieties. Some people even sell these to make a living. **Bhaglu Chalathiya of Gaildubba village reported that the Bhaariya used to eat *Roti* of flour prepared from dried and ground mango seed kernels with *Ballar Saag*. They used to eat *Mahua* too. Bamboo shoots and *Dovey* were also consumed. The green leaves of *Koylaar* plant were also cooked and eaten.** They relate how they used to practice '*Dahiya*' (seeds are broadcast, not sown) farming, and reap good harvests of *Beur Kutki*. *Madia*, *Kang*, *Kangni*, *Jagni*, *Sikka* and *Dangra* used to be sown. The changed times have introduced a worrisome development - the '*Dahiya*' method of farming has been banned. "How will we survive?" they ask. Bhaglu described [Dahiya](#) farming – before the annual rains, Lantana and small bushes were cut away from the piece of land, even if it was stony, and burned. Then [Kangni](#) seeds were broadcast among the ashes, which sprouted with the rains. Weeding and hoeing the area two of three times was sufficient. And the grains were ready for harvest! Every two-three years, the cultivated area had to be abandoned. There was no need for ploughing. That is why it is referred to as Shifting Cultivation in English. It is long since the Bhaariyas have given up this way of farming. But with support from an initiative launched by social worker Naresh Vishvas, they have re-adopted this method. Gurva Udkey of Sookhabhand related how

Kaatul

fruits were also boiled and included in their food. After boiling, the seeds and the water are discarded, for they are sour. When the harvest is exhausted, and people are in danger of going hungry, these fruits are cooked. Similarly, the leaves of

Oomar

, which are also

Garam
, are cooked as a
subzee
(vegetable dish).
Semra
fruits are also cooked and eaten as a
subzee

Retoo
, in combination with maize or
jawar
, is made into
laddoos

. Gurva related how they use the variety of mushrooms found here to make
subzee

. Kinds of mushrooms used as food include
Bhagoda, Baans Gaajre, Bameetha Bhondlee, Pukka Biraad
and
Kumbha

Naresh Vishvaas discussing local seeds with the Bhaariya people

Naresh Vishvaas of Nirmaan, the non-profit organization, says that Paataalkot land is uneven and stony. It lends itself to no other method of farming except Broadcast Farming; and generations of the Bhaariya people have been doing just that. They have traditional knowledge of indigenous methods of farming and conserving seeds. Only the Dahiya method lends itself to the farming of indigenous, nutritious seeds. Naresh Vishvaas has much experience popularizing Dahiya farming of indigenous seeds among the Baiga adivasis of Dindori and Baiga-chak and hill-Korvas of Chhattisgarh and Raigarh. The nearly-vanished varieties of local seeds were located and re-distributed for cultivation among the adivasis. Sikiya is one such variety of grain which nearly forgotten by the people. Now the people of Mandla are cultivating it again. Similarly, Bajra, which is preferred by birds – but they have a variety of this millet which has sharp awns - which birds are not able to bypass to reach the grains. So the harvest is saved. Birds flocking to fields of Nutritious grains, and destroying the crop, are a challenge. But people here climb onto raised platforms to create a din to drive the birds away. Adivasis practise traditional ways of solving challenges relating to farming. Despite such knowledge, the Bhaariyas are under the influence of the world at large. They have started experimenting with irrigation and chemical-based farming. Their lifestyle is changing. The new generation uses mobile phones and Motorcycles. Some of the young adivasis who visited the Seeds Exhibition in large numbers were seen to taking photos on their mobile phones and making videos. A girl in Sookhabhand was seen to be learning to ride a bicycle. Apart from an exhibition of seeds, the Bhaariyas participating in the programme participated in a **Danda Dance**, a **Gedee** dance and **Shaitaam**, which is a kind of a traditional folk song. It can be said in conclusion that the lifestyle of Bhaariyas has been closely linked to Nature. They had a forest-based food system, which is now declining. As climate change is being experienced, the forests are also diminishing. There is less rainfall. The traditional sources of water are going dry. Recently, a village experienced a landslide. Their lifestyle and their farming tradition are also changing. But the Dahiya tradition of farming holds a promise of success with the local seed varieties. The fact all classes of Bhaariya society were present at this programme in large numbers proves this. Dahiya farming offers nutritious grains as well as food security. It protects health saving biodiversity at the same time. Environmental protection is ensured. Farming will be sustainable. A lifestyle that protects local culture and uses nature non-destructively – the Bhaariya lifeftyle - will be preserved. Contact the **author** of the original article (Paataalkot mein Beejon ki Rishtedaaree) which was SPECIALLY WRITTEN FOR VIKALP SANGAM - <http://vikalpsangam.org/article/babamayaram-patalkot-beej/#.XcKSgrkzZNA> [Thanks to Shrishtee Bajpai for inputs to the translation.]