

Political and Cultural Heritage of The Dangs: Indigenous Governance, Memory, and Identity in South Gujarat

Rajendra Sumanbhai Patel

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology,
Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat

Received: Feb. 15, 2018

Accepted: March 14, 2018

Abstract: *The Dangs region, located on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra, represents a distinctive yet understudied case of tribal political and cultural heritage in India. Inhabited primarily by Bhil, Kunbi, and Varli communities, the Dangs historically consisted of fourteen small principalities whose rulers maintained autonomy through kinship-based governance and collective memory rather than monumental architecture or centralized institutions. Instead, Dang's heritage is embodied in intangible traditions, including the annual Dang Darbar, Veergal (memorial stones), and the symbolic Roopgadh Fort. This paper examines the heritage of the Dang through an interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, cultural studies, and heritage theory. By analyzing archival records, ethnographic accounts, and oral traditions, it situates Dang's political and cultural legacy within broader debates on indigenous governance, colonial co-option, and heritage preservation. The study argues that Dang's heritage is not a relic of the past but a dynamic cultural resource that continues to shape identity, resilience, and social cohesion among tribal communities. The findings contribute to regional historiography and global scholarship on heritage by emphasizing intangible traditions as central to understanding cultural diversity. Recognizing Dang's heritage challenges dominant monument-centered narratives and underscores the importance of inclusive heritage policies for indigenous communities.*

Keywords: *The Dang, Bhils, indigenous governance, Dang Darbar, Veergal, Roopgadh Fort, cultural memory, heritage studies*

Introduction:

Cultural heritage is increasingly recognized in academic discourse as encompassing not only material artifacts and monumental structures but also intangible practices, oral traditions, political systems, ecological knowledge, and collective identities (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). This expanded conception of heritage allows for the inclusion of marginalized communities and voices that have often been excluded from mainstream historical narratives. In particular, tribal societies in India highlight the necessity of this inclusive framework. Their heritage does not reside in palaces, temples, or written chronicles but in oral traditions, ecological practices, kinship-based governance, and cultural expressions that have been transmitted across generations.

The Dang region of South Gujarat provides a compelling example of such an alternative heritage framework. Inhabited mainly by Bhil communities, along with Kunbi and Warli groups, Dang historically developed as a federation of fourteen small principalities that thrived on autonomy, kinship bonds, and local ecological adaptation. These rulers and their societies embodied indigenous forms of governance rooted in collective decision-making and ritual authority rather than centralized bureaucracy. Unlike mainstream princely states, whose legacy is often measured in monumental architecture, Dang's cultural markers are found in institutions such as the annual Dang Darbar, memorial traditions like Veergal stones, and modest yet symbolic architectural remnants such as the Roopgadh Fort. These heritage elements reflect not only cultural identity but also the resilience and agency of tribal communities in negotiating their place within larger political and historical frameworks.

Furthermore, Dang's heritage must be understood in its historical relationship with colonial and post-colonial governance. British authorities in the nineteenth century sought to control Dang's abundant forest resources while simultaneously co-opting its Bhil rulers into a framework of indirect governance. This process illustrates broader colonial strategies applied to tribal societies across India, including Chotanagpur (Sinha, 1962) and Bastar (Sharma, 2001). The annual Dang Darbar, initiated under British rule, continues today as both a symbolic and functional cultural-political institution, exemplifying the transformation of colonial mechanisms of control into living traditions of tribal assertion.

This paper examines Dang's political and cultural heritage within the intersecting frameworks of history, anthropology, and heritage studies. By situating Dang about both regional historiography and global

debates on intangible heritage and indigeneity, the study underscores its broader significance. It aims to bridge gaps in scholarship by highlighting how indigenous governance, cultural memory, and oral traditions function as enduring forms of heritage that resist erasure and continue to shape contemporary identities.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

Scholarly work on tribal governance in India highlights the distinctiveness of kinship-based political systems compared with mainstream Hindu or Muslim polities. Elwin (1964) and Majumdar (1961) emphasized the importance of oral traditions and customary law in structuring tribal societies. Within Gujarat, Hardiman (1994) demonstrated how colonial authorities sought to extract resources from Dang's forests while simultaneously negotiating authority with Bhil chiefs. It reflected a broader colonial strategy of indirect governance observed in other tribal regions such as Chotanagpur (Sinha, 1962) and Bastar (Sharma, 2001).

In cultural studies, Mathur (2015) interprets Veergal memorial stones as social memory devices, while Shah (2010) discusses the Dangi Ramayana as a form of cultural-political resistance. Globally, heritage theorists such as Smith (2006) and Harrison (2013) emphasize that heritage must be understood as a living, contested process rather than a static preservation of monuments.

Despite these contributions, Dang remains understudied. This paper, therefore, adopts an interdisciplinary framework, drawing from subaltern historiography, heritage studies, and indigenous governance theory, to examine Dang's legacy.

Research Problem:

Despite its distinctive cultural and political traditions, the Dang region has received limited scholarly attention compared to other tribal areas of India. While historians and anthropologists (e.g., Hardiman, 1994; Elwin, 1964; Majumdar, 1961) have examined aspects of tribal governance, ecology, and colonial encounters, the cultural heritage of Dang remains insufficiently explored as a living, dynamic phenomenon. Existing studies focus primarily on economic exploitation of forests or colonial administrative strategies, with relatively little emphasis on how institutions like the Dang Darbar, memorial practices such as Veergal stones, and symbolic sites like Roopgadh Fort articulate tribal identity, resilience, and collective memory.

This underrepresentation contributes to the marginalization of indigenous voices in Indian historiography and global heritage studies. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for regional history but also for expanding global frameworks of heritage, which are often dominated by monumentality and elite culture.

Research Objectives:

Grounded in this problem, the present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyze the political legacy of Bhil rulers in the Dang within historical and cultural contexts, with particular attention to kinship-based governance, customary law, and modes of indigenous authority.
2. To examine cultural heritage elements such as the Dang Darbar, Veergal memorial stones, and Roopgadh Fort as expressions of intangible and tangible heritage, linking them to broader practices of memory and identity.
3. To situate Dang's heritage within global debates on indigenous governance, cultural memory, and heritage preservation, thereby contributing to more inclusive theoretical frameworks in heritage studies.
4. To highlight the resilience of tribal communities in preserving their cultural autonomy amidst colonial co-option and post-colonial marginalization, offering insights for policy and heritage management.

Methodology:

This study adopts a **qualitative and interdisciplinary research design** to examine the political and cultural heritage of the Dang region. The methodology is structured around three complementary approaches:

1. **Historical-Archival Analysis-** Primary sources such as the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1909), *Bombay Presidency Gazetteer* (1926), and *Dang District Gazetteer* (1971) were consulted to reconstruct the political and administrative history of the region. Archival documents, colonial records, and missionary accounts (e.g., Pitnagar, 1909) were systematically analyzed to understand how the Bhil principalities were represented in colonial discourse and how the institution of the Dang Darbar was formalized. This method allowed for the critical evaluation of both indigenous practices and colonial interventions.

2. **Ethnographic and Cultural Interpretation-** Although field-based ethnography was not directly conducted for this study, secondary ethnographic sources such as Elwin (1964), Hardiman (1994), and Shah (2010) were used to interpret the cultural traditions of the Bhil communities. Oral traditions, performative practices like the Dang Ramayana, and memory practices associated with Veergal memorial stones were analyzed through the lens of cultural anthropology. These sources were triangulated with local histories and community narratives to capture the living and performative dimensions of heritage.
3. **Heritage Studies and Theoretical Framing-** The research draws upon critical heritage studies (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013) to analyze how Dang's heritage should be conceptualized within broader academic debates. This approach highlights the intangible, performative, and dynamic aspects of heritage, positioning Dang within global discourses of indigeneity, cultural rights, and the politics of memory. By doing so, the study moves beyond descriptive historiography to contribute to theoretical discussions on inclusive heritage frameworks.

Analysis and Discussion:

Historical and geographical context: landscape, antiquity, and cultural continuities:

The Dang's rugged, forested terrain and relative inaccessibility have profoundly shaped its socio-political formations and cultural expressions (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1926; Dang District Gazetteer, 1971). Archaeological indicators and pervasive mytho-historical associations (e.g., links to the *Rāmāyana*) suggest extended temporal depth for human occupation and ritual landscapes. The region's ecology, including dense forests, seasonal rivers, and cliff-lined valleys, produced livelihood strategies (shifting cultivation, minor forest produce, hunting) that reinforced small, kinship-anchored political units rather than territorially expansive states (Elwin, 1964). Thus, Dang's material and ecological conditions must be read as active agents in the production of its distinctive heritage forms: decentralized political authority, oral memory traditions, and locally embedded performative institutions.

Bhil political structures: kinship, ritual authority, and degrees of autonomy:

The political idiom of Dang's Bhil chiefdoms privileges ritual legitimacy and kin-networks over bureaucratic sovereignty. Chiefs (sardars) typically combined ritual leadership with mediatory roles, including organizing dispute resolution, marshaling kin groups for defence, and representing collective interests in inter-polity negotiations. Unlike princely polities invested in courtly display, Dang's elites manifested authority through ceremonial salience and moral leadership embedded in everyday social life (Majumdar, 1961; Elwin, 1964). It explains both their resilience in local governance and their vulnerability to external pressures: ritual authority is potent for intra-community cohesion but can be instrumentalized or undermined through colonial administrative strategies.

The Dang Darbar: institutional genesis, function, and performative politics:

Originally formalized through colonial administrative practice in the mid-19th century, the Dang Darbar is a paradigmatic example of an institution that migrated from imperial governance technique to indigenous performative heritage (Pitnagar, 1909; Hardiman, 1994). Functionally, the Darbar served multiple roles: (a) a locus for negotiation between Bhil chiefs and colonial agents (pensions, boundary settlements, forest access); (b) a juridical and social forum where claims and grievances were aired; and (c) a ritualized spectacle, including an annual event of symbolic renewal that re-enacts social hierarchies, distributes honours, and reaffirms community ties. Analytically, the Darbar should be read as a living institution: its ritual choreography encodes political memory and social norms, while its continuity after 1947 illustrates the capacity of indigenous institutions to absorb, transform, and repurpose colonial interventions (Hardiman, 1994; Smith, 2006). The Darbar's survival also foregrounds how communal identity is produced performatively across generations rather than through fixed material monuments.

Veergal memorial stones: materiality, semiotics, and mnemonic networks:

Veergal, such as memorial stones carved or inscribed to commemorate individual heroism, operate simultaneously as material artefacts and nodes of social memory (Mathur, 2015). Their iconography (weapons, carved figures, inscriptions) and ritualized commemoration (annual offerings, local recitations) function to naturalize genealogies of valour and to materialize moral codes of resistance. Unlike textual archives, Veergal anchor memory in the landscape: they are performative loci where oral histories are embodied and tested through ritual practice. The analysis of Veergal, therefore, requires material description, semiotic interpretation, and ethnographic sensitivity to the contexts in which commemorative practices are enacted and reinterpreted.

Roopgadh Fort and symbolic landscapes: modest monuments, significant meanings:

Although not monumental in the conventional sense, Roopgadh Fort and associated architectural features (stone tanks, carved motifs) are symbolic condensations of political memory. They function as focal points in a distributed landscape of memory, such as sites where narratives of resistance, lineage, and territorial belonging concentrate. Interpreting these modest structures demands an approach that privileges symbolic capital over monumental scale: these sites work as affective anchors for identity and as spatial claims that contest outsider narratives of absence or primitiveness.

Colonial encounters: forest policy, co-option, and the politics of recognition:

Colonial policy toward Dang combined extractive interests (timber, forest regulation) with strategies of indirect rule. The British negotiated with Bhil chiefs through pensions, ceremonial recognition, and legal classifications that attempted to make tribal authority legible to colonial administration (Hardiman, 1994; Gazetteer, 1926). Such co-option created ambivalent political legacies: it preserved a degree of autonomy while embedding chiefs within colonial patronage networks that reconfigured local power relations. Analytically, the colonial encounter must be seen as producing new institutional forms (e.g., the ritualized pension and the Darbar as administrative theatre) rather than simply erasing indigenous practices.

Post-colonial transformations: continuity, integration, and heritage politics:

Post-1947 administrative integration (initially into Bombay Presidency and later reorganization under Gujarat) altered formal political structures but did not efface the symbolic and ritual power of Dang's institutions. The continuing celebration of the Dang Darbar, the maintenance of pensions to royal descendants, and renewed interest in Veergal as cultural heritage illustrate complex processes of cultural persistence and negotiation. Post-colonial policy frameworks, including development, forest regulation, and tourism, pose both opportunities and threats: they can provide resources for documentation and conservation. Still, they can also commodify or appropriate intangible practices unless community agency is central to policy design.

Gender, social differentiation, and the internal dynamics of heritage:

Analysis must also address how heritage is gendered and socially stratified. Women's roles in ritual transmission, domestic performance of oral traditions, and stewardship of ecological knowledge are critical yet frequently marginalized in archival and ethnographic records (Elwin, 1964; Shah, 2010). Attention to intra-community differentiation (age, clan, gender) complicates unitary narratives of "tribal culture" and calls for micro-level ethnographies to recover often-silenced actors in heritage production.

Ecological knowledge, material culture, and sustainable heritage practices:

The entanglement of ecological knowledge (forest management, seasonal calendars, medicinal plant lore) with cultural practices suggests that heritage preservation must be linked to ecological conservation. Veergal sites, ritual groves, and traditional water systems are simultaneously cultural artefacts and ecological nodes; their sustainability depends on integrated management that respects both cultural protocols and environmental realities.

Theoretical implications: subaltern memory, intangible heritage, and politics of recognition:

Dang's case advances several theoretical claims: it challenges monument-centric models of heritage (Smith, 2006); it affirms the centrality of performative institutions in constituting political memory; and it contributes to subaltern historiography by showing how marginalized groups produce durable institutions that mediate change (Hardiman, 1994; Sinha, 1962). The study thereby supports a broader reconceptualization of heritage as contested, negotiated, and temporally layered.

Policy recommendations and conservation priorities:

From this analysis, several policy priorities emerge: (1) community-led documentation of oral traditions and Veergal iconography; (2) legal recognition of intangible practices (annual Darbar, ritual calendars) within state heritage frameworks; (3) participatory ecological conservation linked to cultural sites; (4) careful regulation of tourism to prevent commodification; and (5) capacity building for local custodians to manage heritage on their terms.

Limitations and directions for future research

This analysis is constrained by reliance on archival and secondary ethnographic materials; systematic fieldwork, such as participant observation at Darbar ceremonies, oral history interviews across clans, material analysis of Veergal, and archaeological survey at Roopgadh, would substantively deepen interpretation. Future research should also adopt comparative frameworks (e.g., Chotanagpur, Bastar) and

employ mixed methods (GIS mapping, ethnobotany, oral history archiving) to capture the multi-scalar dynamics of Dang's heritage.

Conclusion:

The heritage of Dang challenges conventional paradigms of cultural history and heritage studies by demonstrating that the absence of monumental architecture does not equate to cultural marginality. Instead, the political and cultural legacies of the Bhil principalities reveal an alternative epistemology of governance, memory, and identity grounded in ritual authority, kinship cohesion, and oral traditions. The *Dang Darbar*, *Veergal memorial stones*, and *Roopgadh Fort* illustrate how heritage is not a static relic of the past but a living, evolving process that adapts to historical transformations while preserving community resilience.

From an academic standpoint, this study makes several critical contributions. First, it expands the scope of **heritage studies** by foregrounding intangible and performative practices as legitimate and vital heritage forms. In doing so, it challenges monument-centric frameworks that dominate both policy and scholarship (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). Second, it contributes to **subaltern historiography** by showing how indigenous memory practices and ritual institutions operate as counter-archives, offering insights into histories otherwise silenced by colonial and state-centric narratives (Hardiman, 1994). Third, it enriches debates in **political anthropology** by analyzing the endurance of kinship-based governance systems and their adaptive strategies under colonial and post-colonial regimes.

The case of Dang also underscores the importance of linking heritage with **ecological and sustainability concerns**. Tribal traditions of forest management, sacred groves, and seasonal knowledge highlight the inseparability of cultural and ecological systems. In the current era of climate change and environmental crisis, these indigenous practices offer valuable models for sustainable coexistence with the environment. Thus, Dang's heritage is not only historically significant but also globally relevant, contributing to conversations about **indigeneity, environmental justice, and cultural resilience**.

Policy implications follow directly from these findings. Recognizing and preserving Dang's heritage requires a shift from top-down approaches to **community-centered frameworks** that place tribal custodians at the heart of heritage management. Integrating intangible heritage into official heritage registers, supporting oral tradition documentation, and ensuring participatory conservation of sacred sites are essential steps. Moreover, the role of heritage as a source of dignity, identity, and political agency for tribal communities must be acknowledged in both cultural and developmental policies.

Ultimately, the Dang's heritage exemplifies the need to conceptualize heritage as **plural, contested, and dynamic**. Its study offers a corrective to exclusionary narratives of Indian history, enriches global heritage debates, and affirms the enduring agency of indigenous communities in shaping cultural memory. By recognizing Dang not merely as a marginal tribal region but as a site of profound cultural innovation and resilience, this research affirms that heritage is not only about the past but also about ongoing struggles for recognition, identity, and justice.

References

1. Chitle, D. B. (1978). *Dang: Ek Samyak Darshan*. Ahwa: Dang District Panchayat.
2. Elwin, V. (1964). *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*. Oxford University Press.
3. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*. (1926). Rewa Kantha, Cambay, Surat Agency (Vol. VI-B). Bombay: Government Central Press.
4. Gujarat Vernacular Society. (1932). *History of Dang* (H. T. Parekh, Author). Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vidyasabha.
5. Hardiman, D. (1994). *Power in the forests: The Dangs, 1820–1940*. In D. Hardiman (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies IX* (pp. 49–87). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
6. Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. Routledge.
7. Majumdar, D. N. (1961). *Races and Cultures of India*. Asia Publishing House.
8. Mathur, S. (2015). *Memorial stones and memory practices in Western India*. *South Asian Studies*, 38(2), 245–268.
9. Pitnagar, J. M. (1909). *The Dang Darbar*. Missionary Report, American Mission Press.
10. Shah, G. (2010). *Orality and resistance: The Dangi Ramayana as cultural assertion*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(32), 57–63.
11. Sharma, V. (2001). *Bastar and Its Heritage: Tribal Culture and Colonial Encounters*. Manohar.
12. Sinha, S. (1962). *State formation in tribal India*. *Indian Anthropologist*, 2(1), 30–45.
13. Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.
14. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. (1909). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
15. *Dang District Gazetteer*. (1971). Ahmedabad: Government of Gujarat.