

# The Story of Baiga Women of Kutelidadar

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"Kutta billi jo paani jhutharat hai vo paani piyath hai hum log."

Sumitra bai

Highlighting discriminatory practices that the Baiga women have to confront because of their identity of being 'Baigin', this paper traces the journey a group of Baiga women undertook to tackle the water scarcity problem in Dahiyaan tola, a journey of addressing their 'darr (fear)' of dealing with state agencies and claiming their rights.

**Abstract** This paper is based on an ongoing 10-month immersion experience in Kutelidadar, a 'forest village' in central India, Madhya Pradesh. The village immersion helped me understand the everyday experiences of Baiga women, opening me up to a deeper awareness of their culture, rituals and their day-to-day life. Highlighting discriminatory practices that the Baiga women have to confront because of their identity of being 'Baigin', this paper traces the journey a group of Baiga women undertook to tackle the water scarcity problem in Dahiyaan tola, a journey of addressing their 'darr (fear)' of dealing with state agencies and claiming their rights. Introduction In the winter of February 2019, I went to Bich tola (hamlet) of Kutelidadar village, located in Karanjija block, Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh. The Baiga women were constructing a house. I met Saraswati and the other women from Bich tola, who had come to talk to me because they assumed that I was a 'samuh wali didi' (someone associated with the working of SHGs)'. They told me about the scarcity of water in their tola and that they were not able to irrigate their fields in summer or winter; they had to wait for the monsoon to irrigate their fields. They were dependent on rainwater because there was no other source of water available in their tola. In the first few meetings with the Baiga women, their focus was on the problem of lack of irrigation in their tola; after some months, the women from Dahiyaan tola and Bich tola spoke of the lack of drinking water. Sumitra didi said, "Pine la paani nahin hai hamare tola mein, kutta billi jo paani piyat hai, vo paani piyat hai hum (We don't have water to drink. We drink the same water that dogs and cats drink)." This statement shifted the gravity of the whole problem in that moment. We (the community and I) started discussing this issue with the other villagers and invited their suggestions so that we could find a solution to the water scarcity in the tola. Had the issue been just about water, we could have easily resolved it. It turned out to be more than that. During the subsequent gatherings and discussions, the women spoke of the 'darr (fear)' they have about speaking to bureaucrats because of their identity as Baiga women. The tattoo they carried, which signified their identity as Baiga, was now being ridiculed and scoffed at by the people in government offices and in their daily life. These discussions revealed that the real or root problem was not water scarcity but the darr the Baiga women often refer to in all their discussions, "Humla darr lagta hai afsar se baat karne mein (We feel scared to talk to the officers)." During my second village immersion some months later, I tried to understand this darr, to which the Baiga women were continuously referring in the meetings. "What is that darr they are pointing to? Why is it that the Baiga women did not raise their voices to resolve the water scarcity issue in their tola? What stops them? Why do the Baiga women think they need to change themselves, to give up their identity? What factors force them to feel embarrassed in the everyday spaces of their lives? Why are fewer water resources sanctioned in the Bich tola and Dahiyaan tola? Because they are Baiga women, why do



they face these discriminatory practices?

Geographical Location Situated in the

eastern part of Madhya Pradesh, Dindori district borders Chhattisgarh state. It has Shahdol district in the east, Mandla district in the west, Umariya district in the north (all in Madhya Pradesh), and Bilaspur and Kawardha districts of Chhattisgarh state in the south. The total area of the district is 7,470 sq km. The famous River Narmada, considered holy by the people, passes through the district, surrounded by the herbal rich Maikal mountain ranges situated at an altitude of 1,100 m above mean sea level. The greater part of the district is very rugged and mountainous although it does have some small and scattered patches and tracts of black soil. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the Gond-dominated people of Dindori. Rice and wheat are the main crops grown year after year in the region. Dindori district has seven blocks, one of which is Karanjija. The block has 104 villages and a total of 19,822 houses. As per Census 2011, Karanjija's population is 86,802, of who 43,390 are men whereas 43,412 are women. Kutelidadar village For my immersion, I was placed in Kutelidadar village, Umariya panchayat, located in the administrative block Karanjija of Dindori district. Kutelidadar is a 'forest village'. The distance from Pendra road, the nearest railway station, to Karanjija block headquarters is 61.9 km; then one has to take a bus or auto from Karanjija to Rusa, a distance of around 12 km, and from Rusa to Kutlehi, which is another 12 km. To reach Kutelidadar, the villagers have to walk about 2 km from Kutlehi because there is no auto or bus service to the village. The distance from the Kutelidadar to the panchayat, situated in Umariya, is about 3 km. There is a weekly market on Thursdays in Umariya. This is the only day when autos or jeeps come into the village to ferry villagers to and from the market. The village is surrounded by mountains and is situated in the middle of the forest. Agriculture is the mainstay of the village. The mountains have dense forests and the villagers are hugely dependent on the forests for firewood and other produce. They also use the mountain land for cultivation. Being poorly connected to Karanjija block, the village has been at the margins of

both state and non-governmental development interventions. It was as recent as 2018 that the village got electrified, although Dahiyaan [tola](#) still has not seen light. The road to the village is yet to be constructed. During one [gram sangathan](#) (Village Organization) meeting during my first immersion (village stay), although the men in the village repeatedly raised concerns over the unconstructed road, no conversations around drinking water in Dahiyaan [tola](#) emerged. I was wondering why such a platform created for the women did not even think about asking women about their issues. A stream (referred to by the villagers as '[Kutlahi nadi](#)') runs through the village; however, only the Gonds, residing in the [Kisan tola](#) are able to use the water for irrigation. The Baigas cannot use the water because their houses are situated far away and uphill from the stream; therefore, they rely mainly on the rainwater for irrigation. There is no functional health-care centre in the village or in nearby villages, say the villagers. They travel to Karanjija, which has a government block hospital for medical problems. Punjab National Bank and Central Gramin Bank are located in Karanjija block, and the villagers have to travel to the block for monetary transactions.

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**The Baigas in Madhya Pradesh** The Baiga is a primitive Dravidian tribe in the Central Province, with 25,000 members in 1901, residing principally in Mandla and the adjoining districts. In Mandla and Balaghat, the Binjhal are known to be a sub-caste of the Baiga. They include several of the Sambalpur zamindars. The Bhumia (guardian of the earth) are the same tribe as the Baiga whereas the Bhaina of Bilaspur is probably another offshoot. Raibhaina is also considered a sub-caste of the Baiga in Balaghat. The Baiga have several endogamous divisions, some of who will not eat with each other. The Gondwana, who eat beef and monkeys, are the lowest sub-caste. Each sub-caste is divided into several exogamous septs, the names of which are identical in many cases with those of the Gonds ([Imperial Gazetteer of India Volume 6](#)). In Kutelidadar village, the Bich tola and Dahiyaan tola are dominated by the Baiga community. They live a simple life doing agricultural work. They can only grow their crops in the monsoon season because of the lack of any water in their tola for irrigation. The forest is the main source of their livelihood, and from which they also get vegetables, fruit and wood. The people of the Baiga community cannot avail of the benefits of the seasonal stream because their fields are located far away; they also do not have any alternative such as pipelines that connect the stream directly to their fields because buying pipes and connecting the stream to their fields was financially impossible for them. The Baiga community primarily depends on rain to irrigate their crops; they then preserve those crops so that when there is no rain, they have food to eat. They earn some money by performing cultural dances when they are called to on occasions in the other villages. They rear pigs and goats, which adds a little to their livelihood.

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**Conversations on Water Scarcity** The Dahiyaan and Bich *tolas*, dominated by the Baiga community, deal with water scarcity on a regular basis. In Bich *tola*, there were only two handpumps; Dahiyaan *tola* had a jhiriya (a small pit dug near streams to collect water for drinking) and the seasonal stream, from which the people fetch water to drink. The seasonal stream is a common source of water for dogs, cats and cattle. In summer, the village stream dries up and they have to cover 3–4 km by foot to fetch water from the handpump in Bich *tola*. During my visits to the Baiga and Dahiyaan *tolas*, I saw that there was not a single crop in the land of the Baigas. The women of the Baiga *tola* spoke about the other reasons they could not irrigate their land—the main reason being financial constraints. Neither could they afford to buy the pipes needed to carry water from the river nor did their *tola* have a well from which they could draw water to irrigate their land. I soon became aware through my conversations with the villagers and my observations of the village dynamics that the Gond community considered the Baiga community to be of an inferior status because of the latter's practices such as eating pork and drinking *mahua* (the local fermented drink). Ahirin *bai* from Dahiyaan *tola* recalled an instance when she went to a government office for some work and there the official ridiculed the other Baiga women without tattoos, saying, "*Tum to nakli Baiga ho* (You are fake Baiga)." Tattoos or bodily inscriptions are major ways to identify Baiga women. Although practised over years, recent trends indicate that the younger generation of Baiga women hesitate to tattoo themselves. Influences of the outside world, along with stigma associated with being a Baiga woman, has contributed to this hesitation. All the women were unanimous in saying that their tola faced a very serious water crisis. "Haan paani ki samasya hai tola main bohot (Yes, the tola has severe water crisis)." I asked them, "Why are you not submitting an application in the panchayat if there is so much of a water problem?" They replied, "Bahut aavedaan diye hai *panchayat* me lekin vo sarpanch sachiv kuch nahi aaye diyat hamaar tola mein (We have submitted many applications in the panchayat office but the sarpanch and the sachiv are not doing anything for our tola)." I asked them if they had raised this issue in the gram sabha. Sagani *bai* said, "Hum logan ka darr laagat hai sarpanch, sachiv se (We are scared of the sarpanch and the sachiv

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The Baiga women had many suggestions for resolving the water crisis in the village such as digging more wells in the tola and channeling the water from the pond located on a hill near the village; the pond has a perennial supply of water through the whole year. It occurred to me that if the Baiga women had ideas to resolve their water crisis, why were they hesitant about placing their suggestions in the gram sabha? What then is this darr they spoke of time and time again?

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**The Journey towards Empowerment** When I next visited the village in January 2020, all the women were delighted to see me in their *tola*. They brought up the water issue that we had been discussing and hoping to resolve. We picked up from where we left off. This time, together, we wrote out an application stating the problem of lack of drinking water in Dahiyaan *tola*. After their previous experiences of being ignored in the *panchayat*, the women decided to go to Dindori district headquarters, submit their application to the District Collector and apprise him of their water scarcity problem that they had been tackling forever. On 4 February 2020, my colleague Carol and I accompanied around 16 Baiga women to submit the application. Although I was anxious about the outcome, the women seemed so confident when they met the Collector Mr. Bakki Karthikeyan (I.A.S.). They informed him about their problem and how they were all struggling to find drinking water. The Collector assured them that this issue would be addressed as soon as possible. The Collector's assurance gave the women a ray of hope. Soon thereafter, a Public Health Engineer (PHE) officer came to inspect the water resources in the village. When the Collector visited the Dahiyaan *tola* subsequently, the villagers were very excited; the women were doubly so because the Collector had visited them because of their continuous efforts; they saw that their unity and persistence had paid off.



Saraswati, my co-researcher, said, “*Bohut khush hain, didi, kyunki pehli baar Collector aaya hai gaon mein* (We are very happy, didi, because it is for the first time that a Collector is visiting the village).” Besakhiya didi said, “*Pura tola ghuma ke laaye hai Collector ko pura jhiriya nala sab dikhaye hai jahan le paani piyat hain. Pura paidal chal ke dekha hai hmara tola* (We have taken the Collector around the whole hamlet and shown him every pit and stream from where we drink water. He walked around the entire village).” The women were proud that the Collector had come to their village because it was they, who took the issue to the Collector. The people of the village were delighted that he asked about their problems. Saganididi said, “*Aise paidal paidal renga diye collector la, ayise girat raha jhiriya le* (We made the Collector walk the entire way, roaming around our tola; he was even about to fall while crossing the *jhiriya*).” As she narrated this, it became evident that the women of the Bich and Dahiyaan *tolas* had regained the self-confidence they had lost somewhere not because they were unable to speak to others but because other people behaved as if they had not heard anything. They were happy that someone from the government had come to ask them about their problems; this gave them hope that they could solve all their problems if they raised these issues in the appropriate forum. The happiness and confidence of the *didis* was evident in their voices, “*Hum sab dikha diye collector ko, pura tola ghuma diye* (We showed the Collector everything; we took him everywhere in our village),” With pride in their eyes, they said, “*Hamre jane se Collector aayis hai yaha* (The Collector came to our village because we went to him with our problems).”

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**Conclusion** The deliberate exclusion from the allocation of water resources in the Bich and Dahiyaan *tolas* by the *panchayat* demonstrates how the Baiga community has had to confront the issue of water scarcity in their respective *tolas*. This article is an attempt to show how Baiga women came together to raise their voice against the discriminatory practices they had been facing over many, many years. These past experiences created in them a fear of approaching the authority whether it is the village elders or the government officers. They united to approach the District Collector, thereby breaking their silence in front of bureaucrats. My sole purpose in this was to convince them that they need not believe what the other people say about them. If someone speaks ill about them because of their identity as Baiga women, it reflects that person’s narrow thinking. During the Collector’s visit, I was immensely happy to see how the women came forward to talk to him and ask him about the process of the work. It was heartening also to see how they dealt with the *darr* they had spoken of from the first discussion we had in Bich *tola*.

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Within a month of the Collector’s visit, the construction of a well and stop-dam work started in Dahiyaan *tola*, They started getting benefits from schemes available for Below the Poverty Line (BPL) villagers such as widow-pension and Posak-Aahar scheme. This became possible only because of the efforts of the women, their struggles and their hopes that they will get access to drinking water some day. I am happy they will have sufficient water to drink in summer in their *tola* and they will not have to walk 3 km to fetch water. Also, they will not have to fight among themselves for drinking water nor will they have to drink the water that dogs and cat drink. This article tells the story of the courage of these Baiga women. The women helped each other in this journey, faced their *darr* of talking to government officials, engaging with them in the discussions on water scarcity. My endeavour was to convince them that being a Baiga is not something they need to be ashamed of; on the other hand, they can wear their identity as Baiga women with pride. The Baiga women of the Bich and Dahiyaan *tolas* need to let go of this thought that there is something in them that needs to be repaired. First published by [Pradan](#) on 26 Jun. 2020