

A Living Example of an Indian Tribal Tradition

The Resurgence of Halma

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In the Petlawad tehsil of Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh, nestled within the Moicharani Panchayat, lies a small tribal village called Borpada perhaps no more than a dot on any government map, yet its life is no less complex than the turmoil of a big city. The only difference is that the hardships of a city make newspaper headlines, while the hardships of a village are silently endured.

The water crisis in Borpada had not arrived suddenly. It had deepened gradually, year by year. There was a public well at the heart of the village, and a protective parapet around its mouth was essential but that work was never completed. As a result, every monsoon brought soil, stones, and debris tumbling into the well. Over three years, the well filled so completely that nothing remained inside but silt and contaminated mud. The doors of the panchayat were knocked on again and again each time, promises were given; each time, disappointment followed. Three years of hope slowly turned into exhaustion. And what comes after exhaustion is either collapse or resolve.

A meeting of the Gram Swaraj Samuh, formed by Vaagdharma, was held in Borpada. When the well came up in the discussion, someone said that waiting for the government would cost them another three years. It was then that someone recalled the old path shown by their ancestors Halma. And in that meeting, it was decided: on 6th May 2026, Borpada would hold its Halma.

On the morning of 6th May, traditional musical instruments rang through the village, and Halma songs were sung. These songs carry more than melody they carry a call to action, a reverence for labour, a promise to walk together. The procession woke the village. People stepped out from every home. Women lifted tageris (flat baskets) on their heads; men rested spades and pickaxes on their shoulders. When they gathered around the well and peered inside, three years of neglect had left it wounded a heavy accumulation of stones and mud. But the villagers did not stop. Some descended into the well, others stood above. Stones were hauled out, earth was scooped away, baskets filled and emptied in a steady rhythm.

Halma is an ancient collective tradition of the Bhil tribal community. Its direct meaning is: to work together without wages, without contract, sustained only by the bond of mutual belonging. There is no leader here, no grand announcement there is simply work, done side by side. The roots of this tradition reach back to an era when these communities had neither large resources, nor government support, nor a marketplace. What they had was each other's hand. In the farming season, when work was heavy and hands were few, the entire village would descend upon a single person's field. Whether a house was to be built, a

well dug, or a dam constructed Halma was called upon. No wages were demanded, none were given. In return, there was simply this trust: when my turn comes, the village will stand beside me.



The well before cleaning — years of neglect had filled it with debris and silt. (Photo Credit: Mukesh Porwal, Block Facilitator, Vaagdhara)

Voices from the Village

Vishnu Ninama, who led that day's Halma, says:

“We had been making rounds to the panchayat for three years. Every time we were given assurances, never action. When we decided to do it ourselves, a lightness came over us as though a burden had been lifted.”

Dhulsingh Vasuniya's words touch that philosophical dimension of Halma that cannot be seen from the outside:

“Halma is something our ancestors gave us. It is not just work — it is our way of saying: we are one. When the village stands together, no task feels too great.”

And Ramchandra Vasuniya draws attention to a vital aspect: that day's Halma was not for men alone. The women of the village participated with equal standing in the labour — from

filling baskets to carrying debris. This is a glimpse of the Bhil community's tradition, where collective work holds no distinction between men and women.



Women of the tribal community contributed equally to the Halma carrying baskets and clearing debris.
(Photo Credit: Mukesh Porwal, Block Facilitator, Vaagdhara)

The role played by the Vaagdhara Gram Swaraj Samuh in this Halma also deserves recognition. They did not give the villagers answers they created the space for them to ask questions and find their own answers. In the language of modern development, this is called “community participation,” but in truth it runs far deeper it means trusting people: trusting their wisdom, their traditions, the strength of their relationships. Mukesh Porwal, a community facilitator at Vaagdhara, sees this Halma as carrying a larger message:

“We want this to be more than a single day’s effort. What this village has done shows a path to other villages too trust in your own strength.”

A Lesson for Our Times

When we view tribal societies through an urban lens, there is one thing we often forget: that these communities have kept alive, for centuries, the art of living together. A tradition like Halma is far older and far deeper than modern “teamwork” or “community development” because here there is no expectation of a salary, no desire for fame. There is simply this instinctive human feeling: when my neighbour is in trouble, I will be there. In an age where individualism is spreading village by village in the winds of modernity, traditions like Halma become all the more precious.

In the tribal heartlands of Madhya Pradesh, Vaagdhara is keeping this tradition alive. For Halma is not merely a community task it is a celebration of society’s strength. True honour will come when Halma becomes a partner in development, not a substitute for it.

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