

Chapter 1

Khandesh adivasis further pushed to impoverisation

Dhule, Nandurbar and Jalgaon districts make up the Khandesh region of Maharashtra. Khandesh is bounded on the west by Gujarat in the east by the Vidarbha part of Maharashtra, in the south by Nasik district and the Marathwada part of Maharashtra¹ and in the north by Madhya Pradesh. The Tapi basin lies in the north-west of Dhule district now comprising Shahada and Talode talukas. It forms a distinct topographical unit, delimited from neighbouring state, Madhya Pradesh by Satpura range and from the south by Satmala hills range. An arc of Sahyadris or Western Ghats stretches in the easterly direction. Before 1 July 1998 Nandurbar was part of the larger Dhule district. Dhule was known as the West Khandesh whereas Jalgaon was known as the East Khandesh.² Presently Dhule, Nandurbar and Jalgaon districts comprise of four, six and thirteen administrative blocks respectively.



Map of Khandesh Region

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14672715.1981.10409913>

² https://infogalactic.com/info/Nandurbar_district

Khandesh region lies just south of the great belt of mountains and forests that girdles India, and leads directly into the rich cotton tracts of north east Maharashtra. The strip of land between Akkalkuwa and Talode talukas of Nandurbar district and the Tapi River in the North connect Navapur and Nandurbar talukas of Nandurbar district and in the South form a part of Gujarat. In 1972, a large dam was built on the Tapi River at Ukai in Gujarat displacing hundreds of adivasis.

Tapi River flowing through Khandesh Region

Khandesh's principal natural feature is the Tapi River. Unlike the rest of the Deccan, whose rivers rise in the Western Ghats and flow eastward to the Bay of Bengal, the Tapi River flows westward from headwaters in southern Madhya Pradesh and empties into the Arabian Sea. The Tapi receives 13 principal tributaries in its course through Khandesh region. None of these rivers are navigable, the Tapi River flows in a deep bed which historically made it difficult to use for irrigation. Most of the Khandesh Region lies on south of the Tapi River and is drained by its tributaries, namely Girna, Bori and Panjhra. The alluvial plain north of the Tapi River contains some of the richest tracts in Khandesh, and the land rise towards the Satpura range³. In the centre and east, it's levelled as there are low ranges of barren hills. To the north and west, the plain rises into rugged hills, thickly wooded and inhabited by the Bhil adivasis.

The Tapi River passes through Khandesh region with black soil and fertile plains along its bank It flows east-west across the district cutting Nandurbar district into two almost equal halves. It forms a basin from the beginning of Shahada taluka which broadens into a strip of extremely fertile plains of about 15 to 20 miles in width at its broadest. In the north of the Shahada and Talode talukas, the plains end with a steep rise of the Satpura range, which forms ridges of the rising mountains. Most of the part of Akkalkuwa taluka which bounds the Talode taluka on the west is taken up by the Satpura Range with a relatively narrow strip of the north-west basin included in its southern region. The Nandurbar district lies to the south of the Tapi River. Here the plains end with a slow rise and increasingly rocky soil that blend into the Sahyadri and Galna hills in the South-West. Navapur taluka which bounds Nandurbar district to the west lies entirely in this slowly rising part with a sparse forest covering a large part.

³ <https://amp.en.info-about.ru/30873543/1/khandesh.html>

The Mumbai-Agra Road passes through the eastern part of Nandurbar district through Dhule and Shirpur and lies along one of the old trade routes of India.⁴ The Mumbai-Delhi railway route passes through Jalgaon district of Khandesh region. The Surat-Bhusaval railway line follows the south bank of the River Tapi throughout the region. Prakashe village, which lies at the confluence of the Tapi and the Gomai rivers in Shahada taluka, had been the most important nodal link in earlier days. Prakashe village through Shahada has a route which passes north through the Khetiye pass into the plains of Madhya Pradesh. The metalled road paved with broken rock passes through Akkalkuwa-Talode-Shahada-Shirpur following the north bank of the Tapi River on the Surat-Burhanpur highway.

Khandesh region as agro zone

Khandesh is predominantly an agricultural region and harbours fairly rich flora. The main crops grown are cereals, millets and pulses. Cotton, sugarcane, vegetables, edible fruit yielders and spices are grown. Few plant-based industries for oil, cotton (fibre), starch, sugar, pulses, timber, etc. had been running well in the region. Staple food is derived from sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra), wheat, maize, rice and some pulses like black gram, horse gram, mung bean (green gram), pigeon pea (arhar dal) etc. Maize and rice are common crops where the adivasis have habitation. Sugarcane, banana and cotton are major cash crops in Khandesh. The region is fairly rich in its biodiversity, bio-resources and culture or ethnicity. The adivasis have to rely upon natural resources in their vicinity. They still inhabit in hilly forested areas and have symbiotic relationship with the nature.

Adivasis living in Khandesh region

The major adivasi community living in Khandesh region are Bhil, Bhil Garasia, Banjara, Pawra, Gamit, Gamta, Gavit, Kokna, Kokni, Kukna, Koli Dhor, Tokre Koli, Pardhi and Advichincher. Majority of the adivasis reside in hilly forest areas of Satpura mountain range and extended ranges of Sahyadris, which are offshoots of the Western Ghats⁵. Very few among the Bhils and Banjara have migrated and settled in the plains. Each tribe has its own language, customs, rites, ceremonies, rituals and beliefs. Dhule and Jalgaon districts have approximately 20% adivasi population each, whereas Nandurbar district has nearly 61% adivasi population

⁴ <https://www.scribd.com/document/145065211/BCAS-v13n01>

⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Research-sites-in-Nandurbar-district-Maharashtra_fig1_279418309

Bhils in Khandesh Region

Bhils, the largest among other indigenous adivasi groups in Khandesh region forming the major part of the population of the north-west basin and are believed to be a group of adivasis occupying the whole area of the Satpuda Range and its northern parts. The Bhil have been pressed southwards so that they occupy the large forest belt starting from the Thane district in the west to the western parts of the Vindhya Mountains. Adivasis of the basin thus form simultaneously the fringe of this vast adivasi area and once a part of the larger Moghul Empire. Bhils tried to put up a brave front against the British colonial powers, confronting the agrarian hardships created by them. The British using its military power used ‘suppression and persuasion’ policy against the Bhils. But the British, failed to bring Bhils in their fold. According to folk linguistic perspective, the relatively numerically smaller Pawra adivasi assert their ethnic distinctness from the Bhil adivasis. Pawra claim their superiority over the Bhils in social practices, personal hygiene and aspirations in the resettled regions as it’s equally acknowledged by the Bhils⁶. A close reading of the historical⁷ documentation of the tribes in the Satpura range at the borders of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh confirms that, despite the linguistic unity of the two tribes described by the umbrella term “Bhili” in most of the available records, the Pawras have asserted their ethnic distinctness for centuries (*British Gazette of the Bombay Presidency 1882 re-published in 1980, Thompson 1895; Grierson 1907; Enthoven 1892, 2nd edition 1992*)⁷

Gujjar migrants emerge as exploiters in Khandesh

During 1860s and after that, it’s observed that there was specific mention of Gujjar migration to Khandesh. Gujjar played an important role in the shaping of the land relations of the North-West Tapi basin. The British Gazetteers and reports refer to them as Guzars, Guzar Kunbis, Guzar Vanis and as well as a branch of the Leva (Reve) Patils. Gujjars were all Kunbis by caste, must be clearly distinguished from the Reve Patils⁸ on the one hand and from the Marwaris and Vanis of Gujarat on the other. The British colonial rulers reduced

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https://www.academia.edu/12721982/PROLEGOMENON_TO_THE_BHIL_AND_PAWRA_RELATIONS_IN_WEST_KHANDESH_IN_MAHARASHTRA_A_REASSESSMENT_OF_EVIDENCE_FOR_AN_EARLY_SUBSTRATUM

7 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1981.10409913>

8 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1981.10409913>

the Gujjar to the caste of the Reve Patils⁹, which does not stand historical scrutiny. Despite certain similarities between them the Gujjar constitute a distinct community, which migrated to Khandesh region around the 14th century. Similarly, the Gujjars are also irreducible to the Marwaris and Vanis of Gujarat in spite of some money lending and usurious practices on their part. Their migration into the area is quite different from the slow pace of settlement of the adivasis. The adivasis looked upon land as the only source of sustenance, without the intention of extracting maximum gain from it¹⁰. But the Gujjar Kunbi population, who were cultivators and peasantry was their only livelihood with an eye for acquiring private property and extracting maximum gain from it. Adivasis settled on land for seeing it as only means of livelihood and sustenance but the migrant Gujjar cultivators fenced in the largest available chunks of the most fertile land.

Before the 1850s the only problem noted by the Gazetteers is that of increasing tillage¹¹. It is only after the occupation of land by the migrant Gujjar population that the Gazetteers spoke of shortage of those hired for tilling the land. Taking advantage of the British law and the adivasis, who were magnanimous as they were not cheats or liars or committed any misdeeds or didn't have any intention of extracting benefits from their land, the migrant Gujjars pushed the adivasis to the condition of servitude and slavery through deceit, usury and forgery¹². In Nandurbar district, which is in the North-Western part of Khandesh region, now majority of the landholders are Gujjars, emerging as exploiters who cheated the Bhil cultivators by helping them with small favour during their time of distress. Taking favour from the Gujjar landowners pushed them to more marginalization. The Bhil agricultural labourers have been further hoodwinked under the pretext of raising their wages. Now migrant Gujjars, who have become the employers of the Bhils, if there are disputes it gets transferred from magistrate to the civil courts. Till then, Bhil cultivators and the agricultural labourers are at the mercy of the Gujjar landowners. The migrant Gujjars, who became landowners, used the ignorance and gullibility of the Bhils for pushing them to drudgery. Tactfully, these Gujjar landowners agreed to employ the Bhil cultivators for tilling their land and they even asked them to share the produce, too. The Gujjars started the process of trapping them by giving advance money for purchasing bullocks but that too is given by getting a bond signed by the Bhil cultivators for repayment of loans on 25% interest rate. Bhil adivasis grow crops for production of food and the Gujjar had control over it. When their year ended,

9 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1981.10409913>

10 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1981.10409913>

11 <https://www.scribd.com/document/145065211/BCAS-v13n01>

12 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672715.1981.10409913>

the Gujjar landowners took the entire produce and cheated the Bhil cultivators asking them the repayment money for the bullocks. In the next year, Gujjar landowners try to lure the ignorant Bhil cultivators by sending essential items, like clothes and food grains and were also informed that they have to repay some amount.

When the Bhil cultivators agreed to work for the Gujjar landowners then they asked for settlement of their accounts and an agreement in a new stamped paper. Gujjar landowners, who are the employers of the Bhil adivasi cultivators/sharecroppers, try to impress upon them by sugar-coated expressions and give the poor adivasis money to purchase clothes for their spouses and liquor for their consumption. The Gujjar employer got a new bond drafted, which the Bhil cultivator/sharecropper could not comprehend. The adivasi sharecropper gets back to the work hoping for a better future. Toiling hard in the Gujjar owned land for year or two, the Bhil cultivator/sharecropper decides to quit. Then what he found that whatever money he repaid back for the bullock or toiled with it on the field does not belong to him and he is at the mercy of his employer. Gujjar landowners collude with the local authorities and get a decree passed so whatever the Bhils possess it's all seized and sold. Then the Gujjar landowners offered a chance, then again the Bhils were deceived. Still the Gujjar landowners try to fleece the Bhils by asking for outstanding debts and threat of civil court looms large over their head. It has been going for years together. It's quite common for the poor Bhils under pretence of the transfer of their debt, to be handed over from one creditor to another. The court's ruling against the Bhils by the Gujjar landowners pushes them to further marginalization. When the Bhils signed the bond they entered the name of the mother and as Bhil adivasi suffered anything rather than disgrace to their mother. The threat of the mother being sent to Dhulia Jail pushes them to desperation and they fall in the trap of the Gujjar landowners.

Migration of Adivasis from Khandesh Region

Sugar co-operative factories run in Gujarat hire the cutters in couples through an obscure but efficient network of labour brokers or *mukadams*, who thrive on seasonal distress¹³. These *mukadams* deployed by managing committees of the sugar co-operative factories scout the interior of the adivasi belt in the Khandesh region, which has been developed as 'labour catchment area' for them. A few thousand rupees, advanced in the monsoon, allow the adivasi families to subsist. This amount must be paid back through labour in the harvest

¹³ http://www.ccds.in/download/publication/agenda/agenda_09.pdf

season. Whole adivasi families, adults and children, then get pulled into the work¹⁴.



Adivasi tehsils in Khandesh Region

Every year when the monsoon begins its retreat from the villages of Khandesh arid Marathwada belt up to half-a-million of its rural poor, majority of them being *adivasis* and *dalits*, begins a desperate migration for work that ends in India's largest swathe of sugar country¹⁵. The annual migration is over 45 years old and its routes are well established. The employers more than 200 sugar cooperative factories across the three-state swathe and employees' landless adivasis and dalits or subsistence farmers are also constant but sugarcane profits keep spiralling. The profits grow even as the migrant adivasi or workers remain impoverished.

Each winter, as the migration begins, large refugee camp-like colonies of the migrant adivasi workers from take shape outside sugar co-operative factory gates¹⁶. The colonies' inhabitants, majority of them migrant adivasi workers make do without running water or electricity. In such circumstances, women and girls of the adivasi families who migrate for work, face additional hardships. They have to collect water from a community source for the entire family, and

¹⁴ <https://thewire.in/labour/kolhapur-migrant-labour-distress>

¹⁵ <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/the-sugarcane-cutters-bitter-harvest/>

¹⁶ <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/the-sugarcane-cutters-bitter-harvest/>

they are forced to bathe in the open. In the darkness of the night, between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., the adivasi couples of husband and wife who work as cutters, often accompanied by their older children, leave for the sugarcane fields, returning¹⁷ by the end of the afternoon to join a long line of cane-laden bullock carts at the factory gates, feeding an uninterrupted supply of cane that keeps the factories humming 24 hours and 7 days in a week.

During the day, the adivasi settlement's only inhabitants are the aged and little children. Smoke rise from the burning cow dung cakes that young girls, some of them less than 10 years old, cook on. Household work, including cleaning, cooking and taking care of any cattle, gets delegated to the girls. The ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) does not take into account the needs of rural Indians on the move, and thus ignores the children in these colonies¹⁸. If compulsion arises, many a times, infants accompany their parents to work sites, devoid of child care centres or crèches, suffer health hazards due to pollution or dust. Apart from sugar cane cutting, adivasi men and their families are working in brick kilns, construction sites, agricultural farms or some among men employed as watchman. Cutting sugarcane, head loading of sands and bricks in construction sites, brick making etc. are tedious work and needs lot of energy.

As they migrate, families also lose other welfare entitlements like food grain under the public distribution system. Food must be procured from different sources. Over the sickly sweet stench of the molasses, women cook the coarse, low-quality jowar that the sugar factory gives them as part payment. There are no public health services that the migrant adivasi workers can access; the factories have a doctor to deal with injuries or fever – more to keep the cutters fit for work than concern for their health. The work is physically draining, and the workers have learned to live with body aches and ailments.

The state of the sugarcane cutters exemplifies the worst trends of India's poorly regulated informal sector, which employs over 300 million, or 90% of India's workforce.

However, a large chunk of the adivasi men accompanied by their families from Akkalkulva, Akrani, Shahada, Taloda, Navapur and Nandurbar talukas of Nandurbar district migrate to Gujarat. If not employed as cutter in sugarcane co-operative factories of Gujarat, adivasi couples and even older children work in brick kilns, construction sites, agricultural farms or some among men

18 <https://www.lensculture.com/projects/278995-migrant-sugarcane-workers-of-i>

employed as watchman. Cutting sugarcane, head loading of sands and bricks in construction sites, brick making etc. are tedious work and needs lot of energy.

When the work comes to end at the construction sites, the migrant adivasi workers scout around to search work at other construction sites. In this process, these adivasi migrants and their families go without food for days together. The life of these migrant adivasi workers are full of worries and distress, to escape the hard pressed realities of life, both men and women start consuming country made liquor or hooch and they turn chronic alcoholic. This adds to their woes, use of excessive alcohol leads to developing chronic diseases and other serious ailments such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, liver disease and digestive problems. Excessive drinking also caused breast cancer among women, even it causes mouth, throat, oesophagus, liver and colon cancer both in men and women. Alcoholic dependence results in loss of appetite combined with hard toil when they take less of result. Living in congested areas, in slums devoid of basic amenities, like pure drinking water, clean toilets or sanitation, these migrant adivasi workers and their families suffer from sickle cell anaemia, goitre, even children are malnourished. Many among the migrants fail to find a space in the slums so they live in the pavements under the open sky braving sweltering summer, heavy rains and freezing cold winter. There have been cases of elopement by women and girls jettisoning their families and running away with their 'beloved'. If marriage does not fructify after running away, many of these women or young girls commit suicide. Even there are cases of accidents deaths.

Migrant adivasi workers facing joblessness in COVID-19 pandemic

In Khandesh region's Nandurbar district, the district administration was shocked to see several trucks entering the district limits in April 2020. The trucks were packed with migrant adivasi workers, who went to Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. It was sudden movement and the authorities were clueless. Till 28th April 2020, the district administration said, close to 3,000 adivasi workers were pushed into the state limit—some in trucks and others by foot. Majority of the workers, belonging to Bhil and Pawra adivasi groups, have been working in the sugarcane cooperatives in Surat and Tapi and some as daily wage workers in several districts of Madhya Pradesh¹⁹. The official figures claimed that around 12,000-13,000 workers were stuck in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh for over a month and could not return to Maharashtra because of the nationwide lockdown and also the strict Ministry of Home Affairs' (MHA) order that no

¹⁹ <https://thewire.in/rights/inhuman-act-migrant-workers-sent-back-to-maharashtra-without-consultation>

interstate movement can be permitted²⁰. This, according to the district administration, is only 20% of the total migration. The MHA, on April 29, more than a month of strict restrictions on interstate movement, decided to relax its earlier orders and has now permitted migrant adivasi workers to return to their home state, provided there is a coherent synergy and plan in place between the states sending and receiving migrant workers. What happened in Nandurbar, however, was before the Central government's decision and the Maharashtra government says it an "inhuman and irresponsible act" by the Gujarat and MP governments²¹.

After the influx of migrant adivasi workers, since April 2020, the Nandurbar district administration had been manning its 22 checkpoints and over 180 villages on state borders to identify those who were suddenly sent into the state limits.

Since then, both Padavi and Nandurbar district collector Rajendra Bharud have sent letters to the Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat state administrations, seeking an explanation for their inhuman and irresponsible act of allowing so many adivasi workers to enter Maharashtra amid the national lockdown, without due consultation.

These adivasi workers worked at over 100 different sugarcane cooperatives situated in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and were forced to travel back to Maharashtra since the owners of those cooperative factories refused to take responsibility. Most of these sugarcane co-operative factories were owned by the local politicians. Most of the adivasi workers returned back to their villages without collecting their wages. They were not provided food or even an allowance to travel back home.

The local administration of the two states had issued permission letters even when the MHA had clearly stated that interstate movement is barred. While trucks and a few vehicles from Gujarat had permission from the local tehsildars, the Madhya Pradesh Government had issued a blanket permission allowing the movement on April 26, 2020. These permissions were illegal as the district administration had a clear standing instruction from the Central Government not to allow any such movement. It started on 31st March 2020 the Gujarat government showing its hostility towards Maharashtra state and its workers. Around 120 workers, women and children included had to undergo a gruesome

²⁰ <https://thewire.in/rights/inhuman-act-migrant-workers-sent-back-to-maharashtra-without-consultation>

²¹ <https://thewire.in/rights/inhuman-act-migrant-workers-sent-back-to-maharashtra-without-consultation>

ordeal after they were forcibly packed into an enclosed container truck and pushed into Maharashtra state limits. Valsad district administration of Gujarat was responsible for the incident and the workers were rescued on reaching Palghar district in Maharashtra. It had been continuing for many months during the pandemic.

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