

## CHAPTER 2

### Maharashtra's marginalized communities still at the crossroads...

**M**aharashtra is the most industrialised and the second most urbanised state assessed through the per capita income it ranks as second richest state in India. Spread over a total area of 3, 07,713 sq.km and in area wise it's the third largest state in India positioned after Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Mumbai, its capital is considered the financial and commercial capital of the country. Situated in the western peninsular region of India, Maharashtra occupies substantial portion. State's population is estimated to be 123 million (12.3 crores) in 2020 and its second populous state in India after Uttar Pradesh, 9% of the India's population lives in Maharashtra. The state was carved out on 1 May 1960, along with Gujarat on linguistic basis. Bombay state, which had been expanded in 1956 to include Marathi-speaking parts of Hyderabad state and Madhya Pradesh. Gujarati-speaking areas to the north were separated and Gujarat, a new state was carved out of it.



Map of Maharashtra

Maharashtra borders Goa and Karnataka to the south, Andhra Pradesh to the southeast, Gujarat, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Madhya Pradesh to the north, Chhattisgarh to the east<sup>1</sup> and the Arabian Sea to the west. The Western Ghats,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.maharashtratourism.net/geography.html>

which run north and south, parallel to the Arabian Sea coast, separate the western coastal portion of Maharashtra from the eastern portion of the state, which lies on the Deccan plateau.

### Geographical Regions:

Maharashtra has five geographic regions:

1. Konkan
2. Khandesh
3. Vidarbha
4. Marathwada
5. Pune

**Konkan Region:** Konkan region popularly known Aparantaor. Aparantaka meaning Western border is coastal plain of western India. It lies between the Arabian Sea in the west and the Western Ghats in the east. The plain stretches approximately 530 km from the Damn Ganga River north of Mumbai to the Terekhol River between Maharashtra and Goa states and Daman and Diu union territory<sup>2</sup> in the south. Between 45 and 76 km in width, the Konkan includes the regions of Thane, Greater Mumbai, Raigad, and Ratnagiri.



Map of Konkan Region

The region is criss-crossed by seasonal rivers that drain the heavy monsoonal rainfall from the peak of the Sahyadri Hills. The generally uneven terrain is composed of eroded remnant ranges of the Ghats that form low lateritic

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Konkan>

plateaus in the west and terminate in a coastline of alternating bays and headlands. Only about one-third of the land is cultivable, and the population lives mainly in the relatively fertile river valleys near the coast and in the newly developed industrial belts<sup>3</sup> around Mumbai, Thane, Khopali, and Panvel. The desolate and infertile hills are occupied by the pastoralists communities like Bhil, Kathkari, and Kokana adivasi people. Rice, pulses (legumes), vegetables, fruits and coconuts are the main crops along with that fishing and salt manufacture are important, too.

The industrial complex of Greater Mumbai is the primary economic focus of the region. Nearly all trade is carried on with Mumbai, and steady migration to the city has left rural Konkan depleted of manpower and skilled workers. Mining of iron and manganese continues and it's exported through port of Reddi.

The Konkan ports were popular among the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, even to Arab traders. The ancient Hindu kingdoms ruling over the area drew its prosperity from the spice trade. The cave temples of Elephanta Island and Kanheri proves a claim to the fact to the prosperous culture of this era. With the advent of the Portuguese and British, the port cities were further developed and fortified but now have lost their former importance<sup>4</sup>.

**Khandesh Region:** 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 Maharashtra<sup>5</sup> 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 hillrange. An arc of Sahyadris or Western Ghats stretches in the easterly direction. Nandurbar was carved out of larger Dhule district on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1998. Dhule was known as the West Khandesh whereas Jalgaon was known as the East Khandesh<sup>6</sup>. Presently Dhule, Nandurbar and Jalgaon districts comprise of four, six and thirteen administrative blocks respectively.

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3 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Konkan>

4 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/214304?seq=THREE> COLONIAL PORT CITIES IN INDIA

5 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khandesh>

6 <https://nandurbar.gov.in/district-profile-info/#:~:text=Dhule%20was%20known%20as%20the,of%20this%20region%20was%20Rasika.>

It 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<sup>7</sup>



**Map of Khandesh Region**

The region 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. (See the detailed study on Khandesh region in Chapter 1)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukai\\_Dam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukai_Dam)

**Vidarbha Region:** Vidarbha is the eastern region of Maharashtra and its cauldron of culture comprising of 11 districts namely, Amravati, Akola, Bhandara, Buldhana, Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Gondia, Nagpur, Wardha, Washim and Yavatmal. The region occupies 31.6% of total area and holds 21.3% of total population of Maharashtra. It borders the state of Madhya Pradesh to north, Chhattisgarh to east, Andhra Pradesh to south and Marathwada and Khandesh regions of Maharashtra to west<sup>8</sup>. Located in Central India, Vidarbha has its distinct rich cultural and historical backdrop, different from other parts of Maharashtra. Nagpur is the largest city in Vidarbha region, followed by Amravati, Akola, Gondia, Chandrapur and Yavatmal. Majority of Vidarbhians speak Varhadi, a dialect of Marathi.<sup>9</sup>

Vidarbha is famous for growing oranges and cotton. The region holds two-thirds of state's mineral resources, three-fourths of Maharashtra's forest resources and net producer of electricity generation power. The region throughout the history has remained calmer as compared to rest of India during the communal disturbances engineered by the right reactionary forces. But the region is beleaguered by poverty and malnutrition. Vidarbha is economically backward as compared to other regions of the state.



Map of Vidarbha Region

In recent times, there have been calls for a separate state of Vidarbha, owing to continuous negligence by those at the helm of affairs in Maharashtra towards this region and the insensate and inept political leadership in Vidarbha, barring

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cities\\_in\\_Vidarbha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_Vidarbha)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.123helpme.com/topics/vidarbha>

few. Maharashtra's farmers are living in most miserable condition as compared to the farming community in India. There have been 32,000 farmers' suicides in Maharashtra in a decade, of which 70% being in the 11 districts of Vidarbha region. Though rich in minerals, coal, forests and mountains, the region is economically backward and continuous dominance by the political bigwigs had pushing it to downslide. The region is culturally, politically and financially stands apart from rest of Maharashtra, the agitation for separate state takes a momentum, when the leaders from this region are side-lined by those saddled in power in Maharashtra Government.

**Marathwada Region:** The word 'Marathwada' has been used since the times of the Nizams. The region coincides with the Aurangabad Division of Maharashtra. It borders the states of Karnataka and Telangana, and it lies to the west of the Vidarbha and east of Khandesh regions of Maharashtra.<sup>10</sup>The largest city of Marathwada is Aurangabad. The region comprises of Jalna, Aurangabad, Parbhani, Hingoli, Nanded, Latur, Osmanabad and Beed districts of Maharashtra.

In the region lives 16.84% of Maharashtra's population and is home to nearly 30 % of state's Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. Eight of the districts of the Marathwada region figure in the list of the 100 poorest districts in the country.

The region, perhaps, the most neglected in the state, lacks in natural resources and is prone to drought. It has been perennially facing most severe droughts, with just 5.68 per cent live storage left in 964 dams and groundwater levels already depleting to the extent that bore-wells<sup>11</sup> dug up to even 300-500 feet are not getting a drop of water. Nearly 32% of its 64,818 sq. km area of the region comes under the rain shadow region. The region's annual average rainfall is 750mm and drought is a permanent feature. Irrigation water, in real terms reaches not more than 50,000 acres of cultivable land<sup>12</sup>. Water scarcity is so chronic in the region that to get supply of drinking water twice a week is a luxury. About 98% of agriculture is dry land farming and cotton is the major crop. Cotton cultivation in the region is a risky affair as there is inherent susceptibility of cotton crop to pest and the vagaries of nature, resulting in many a farmer falling prey to debt. Suicide among farmers is on the rise.

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10 <http://www.ijellh.com/papers/2014/November/09-63-71-november-2014.pdf>

11 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marathwada>

12 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/agri-business/marathwada-nothing-escapes-tentacles-of-drought/article26772434.ece>

However, drought is not just about deficient rainfall, dry dams, tankers and crop failure. Adolescent girls and women walk miles in scorching heat to fetch drinking water for their families. As they spot some grimy water at the bottom of a well they rushed. Some of the girls had lost balance and fallen to death while fetching water. It's an endless ordeal for the girls and women of the region.

Girls scouting for water ruins their childhood as thousands of them spend their entire summer vacation in this backbreaking exercise. Backbreaking strife even for women who wander in search of water. Drought means a tough choice between life and death for farmers<sup>13</sup>.

In the region cotton farming is done for about seven months in a year, otherwise the farmers are languishing in penury. When farming work comes to grinding halt, educated unemployment youth and school going children try to corner the manual jobs granted under Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for five months in a year. But since 2014, after NDA came to power in the Central Government, there are intermittent delays in implementing the MGNREGA projects and 100-days of continuous work is now a distant. Long delays in payments had obfuscated the MGNREGA programme.



Map of Marathwada

In Marathwada region, it's common to see post graduates and those passed out from vocational training colleges toiling hard on road construction sites for eking out a living. As the joblessness haunts able-bodied men, especially

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.sascv.org/ijcjs/renusharma.html>

youths, migrate to Gujarat or Western Maharashtra to work in the sugarcane co-operative factories as cutter. Living in most appalling condition, the cutters along with their families try to survive. When Indian Army or para-military forces run a drive to recruit youths as soldiers, it overflows with unemployed youths to undergo the recruitment exercise. Many among them fail, even after putting best of their efforts. Dejected, they face a hazy future and in recent Covid pandemic period, the situation has turned bad to worse.

The region has 14.96 % population of dalits and 4.01% population of adivasi. The right- wing forces have stealthily tried to disturb and sharpen the communal for garnering maximum political mileage out of it. Marathwada's 25% Muslim population have been at the receiving end

Marathwada is faced with an agricultural emergency. With 25-35 farmers committing suicide every week, the eight districts of Marathwada require immediate action for disaster mitigation. Some parts of Marathwada are reeling under continuous drought conditions for four years in a row, and with the plight of farmers worsening with each passing day, the prevailing rural distress in Marathwada is no less than an epic disaster -- a combination of both man-made and natural factors. It is therefore high time Maharashtra government swings into immediate action and wakes up from slumber for confronting the harsh realities of life. Immediate emergency relief measures are absolutely essential. This must be followed by laying down a long-term plan to revive sustainable agriculture in the both – Marathwada as well as the Vidarbha -- regions. An extraordinary crisis requires emergency solutions.

Continuous drought conditions, and also seasons of freak weather conditions when hailstorm and high winds damage standing crops further accentuates the prevailing agrarian crisis. Farmers are being denied their legitimate due, the minimum support price under the pretext of keeping inflation under check. While incomes of all sections of the society are on the rise, farm incomes are stagnating<sup>14</sup>. By keeping the farm prices almost frozen over the years, farmers are in reality being penalized for producing food.

In the name of economic growth, agriculture is being systematically destroyed all over the country. Over the years, agriculture has been deliberately starved of financial support, and now with their land being snatched away, farmers are looking for any and every possibility that provides them a glimmer of hope. Farmers are increasingly turning to reservation on caste basis which provides

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-younger-people-keen-take-up-farming-answer-simple-devinder-sharma>



them a little bit of hope, in desperation looking for anything that can provide economic security that they can latch on<sup>15</sup>.

**Pune Region:** Pune region comprises of Kolhapur, Pune, Sangli, Satara, and Solapur districts. The region has distinctive geographic personality as territorially, the region has crest line of Sahyadri as its western boundary. The southern fringe runs along the interstate boundary between the Goa and Karnataka. Nasik and Ahmednagar districts delineate the northern area. The boundary of Solapur district separates the region from Marathwada. To the eastern side of the region lie Gulbarga district of Karnataka. In other words, the region is surrounded by Karnataka in the south, Konkan region in the west, Nasik district in the north and the north-eastern boundary is surrounded by Aurangabad.<sup>16</sup>

Agriculture is mainstay of the economy. The agricultural landscape of the region is well marked by a significant increase in both, the area as well as the production. The diffusion of agricultural innovation has brought significant change in agricultural system of this region. In Pune region dominance of food crops is found in the western hilly area, central plateau, Bhima valley and south central region. Nearly 70 per cent of the total area is devoted to the cultivation. In the central dry plateau region jowar, bajra, groundnut and sugarcane are important crops. Bhima and Krishna valleys are agriculturally most prosperous areas of the region. In the drought prone area of the region potatoes, onions and vegetables are the main cash crops. Sugarcane is the principal cash crop in Bhima and Krishna basins. In the region horticulture has been developed remarkably. Rice is the staple food crop of the western hilly zone. Cotton and tobacco are the main cash crops in the eastern part of the division.

Sugarcane is main commercial crop in the region. Other cash crops like grapes, tobacco, banana and onion are relatively recent. In the last thirty years there have been considerable changes in agricultural practices such as the development of irrigation, provision of better inputs like fertilizers, improved seeds and diffusion of agricultural innovations.<sup>17</sup>

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15 [https://books.google.co.in/books?id=LEH6DQAAQBAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=LEH6DQAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y) AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN INDIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

16 <https://fdocuments.us/document/04-chapter-ii-information-and-library-network-2pdfchapter-ii-a-geographical-profile.html>

17 <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?jsessionid=2275D29490059FE146EE2C6F27AE990E?doi=10.1.1.691.7054>

The role of lift irrigation is significant in Krishna basin particularly in Kolhapur and Sangli districts. The sugarcane cultivation depends on lift irrigation, while in Pune district sugarcane is grown on canal irrigation. Pune, Satara, Sangli, and Kolhapur districts show high level of irrigation.

Industries play an important role in the economic development of the region. It also stimulates the growth of trade, commerce and transportation. The overall impact of the development can also be seen in the development of agriculture of the region. The major industries and development of the region have confined in and around Pune, Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur and Solapur cities.



Map of Pune Region

The most spectacular aspect of industrial landscape is distinct industrial belt centred in and on Pune city. Of the industrial nodes of the region follow the major transport routes. In the study region Pune urban centre is highly industrialized and urbanized area. The second industrial zone of the region lies between Sangli, Kolhapur and Ichalkaranji. In this area agro-based industries like sugar factories, manufacturing, casting and textile industries have been developed. The third industrial region is Solapur city region, which is famous for textile industry.

In the Pune region, Solapur and Ichalkaranji are specialized for textile industries in Maharashtra as well as in India. The handloom and power-loom industries are located at Vita, Sangli, Kolhapur and Pune. The region has a very diversified composition of industries ranging from agricultural implements, food processing, textile to engineering, chemical, plastic, paper, automobile, transport equipment, electric goods etc. In and around Pune city major industrial units are located. The manufacturing goods include scooters, machine tools, automobile, metals, agricultural equipment, machinery, light engineering and electrical goods. The Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) has developed a number of industrial areas and industrial estates with the establishment of entire infrastructure in all the districts, at tehsil level in the region.

### **Agrarian crisis and Farmers suicide**

Recurring droughts, depleting groundwater levels and mounting debts have made farmers' lives in Marathwada and Vidarbha districts horrible, however, the floods in Western Maharashtra and parts of Konkan region in 2019 added more to the woes of the farmers.

Drought-affected Marathwada and Vidarbha regions, comprising of 19 districts, is a hotbed of farmers' suicides. Farmers have been ending their lives. Of 1,074 farmer suicides from January till June 2020, most cases were in June 2020 during the lockdown. The supply chain crippled, which resulted in a price crash in wholesale markets.

There had been 566 farmer suicides in Vidarbha region and 354 in Marathwada region. The lockdown was particularly hard on farmers sowing perishable crops like fruits and vegetables.<sup>18</sup> Initially, transport restrictions had made it difficult for farmers to take their goods to major wholesale markets and many ended up discarding their produce.

Crisis has deepened over the years. Farmers often fall in the trap of private moneylenders resulting in debt trap. Crops have failing for years together. Despite efforts by successive governments, suicides had not come down, Governments have changed but the key issue remains, water, soil, credit and so on.<sup>19</sup> Recurring droughts has brought down the soil quality and depleted the water table.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/1074-farmers-ended-lives-in-maharashtra-in-6-months/articleshow/77404297.cms>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.deccanherald.com/special-features/maharashtra-agri-crisis-no-end-in-sight-758851.html>

In 11 districts of Vidarbha region dependence is mostly on cotton, in 8 districts of Marathwada sugarcane is a big water guzzler. In drought-prone area, farmers cultivate a crop with a high water intake. Big political bigwigs are associated with sugarcane production in Maharashtra. Majority of big political families in Western Maharashtra and Marathwada are owners of sugarcane factories.

Neo-liberal globalization launched by the Central Government in 1990 has caused a massive growth in inequality in India. The agrarian crisis has gone far beyond the agrarian. It's a social crisis with people leaving agriculture and not getting absorbed anywhere else. Between 1991 and 2011, 1.5 crore farmers dropped out of agriculture, with most becoming landless farm labourers. Lakhs went to other villages and cities in search of jobs that are not there<sup>20</sup>.

Protests against agrarian crisis and farmers' suicide were brewing up. In March 2018, 40,000 farmers walked 182 kilometres from Nashik to Azad Maidan in Mumbai, demanding land rights, loan waivers and support for crop losses. As P.Sainath, founder-editor of the People's Archive of Rural India said, "When these farmers marched with bleeding, blistered feet Doctors from JJ Hospital came up and started treating all those with injuries from walking 182 kilometres. Businessmen came out of Crawford market and left 1,000 pairs of footwear, very quietly, without saying anything, because they had been moved by pictures and photographs of women with bleeding feet walking that distance. Lawyers came out and started asking if they could file any PILs on behalf of the farmers"<sup>21</sup>.

The protesting farmers demanded included farm loan waivers, remunerative prices for crops, implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendations, stringent implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), more pension schemes for poor peasants and agricultural workers, compensation to farmers for losses due to pest attacks, vesting tillers with the rights to temple and pasture lands, opposing acquisition of peasant land for elitist projects like the bullet train and super highways, issues with the public distribution system and a complete change in the river-linking scheme in Nashik, Thane and Palghar districts<sup>22</sup>

Farmers protest in March 2018 was signalling the collapse in prices they received in the real world. The actual and comprehensive costs of cultivation

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20 <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/agrarian-crisis-is-a-social-crisis-now-p-sainath/321306>

21 <https://www.frontierweekly.com/articles/vol-53/53-29/53-29-Agrarian%20Crisis%20Is%20a%20Social%20Crisis.html>

22 <https://kisansabha.org/aiks/aiks-in-news/let-the-farmers-stand-in-parliament-and-address-the-nation-p-sainath-on-the-kisan-mukti-march-to-delhi/#:~:text=Lawyers%20came%20out%20and%20started,on%20behalf%20of%20the%20farmers>

were rising high but their incomes were in decline. The agrarian crisis is about the corporate hijack of Indian agriculture.<sup>23</sup> Farmers were making the point that even their indebtedness as a consequence of the deliberate policies on credit followed by successive governments.

### **Farm women, women migrant farmers and farmers' suicide**

Women have a strong presence in farming activities, however the main question is whether their work is being counted or not. Women's work ranges from seed management to harvesting and post harvesting activities. However, several changes are taking place. In Maharashtra for example, in some of the more prosperous areas where irrigation is available, we are finding that women are moving into dairying while their traditional role in seed management has reduced. The agricultural paradigm of high external inputs, chemical and pesticide intensive agriculture along with introduction of GM varieties of seeds and mechanisation have also meant that women have lost out on their traditional jobs

As Seema Kulkarni, a senior fellow at Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM) and National Facilitation team member at Mahila Kisan Aadhar Manch (MAKAAM) said, "Women farmers are seen to be adapting to the new roles and we are also seeing women in managerial roles in some of these areas. As in grape, pomegranate cultivation and floriculture we are seeing women take on key roles of supervision of labour, spraying of chemicals and pesticides, entering into markets etc. Single women in drought prone areas are also seen negotiating in the market economy just as they are engaged in local weekly markets. These transitions need to be studied and MAKAAM hopes to do such a large scale study in the near future."

Three datasets, which give us a somewhat mixed picture of rural women's work as Census 2011 shows that there has been a 24 percent increase in the number of female agricultural labourers, from 49.5 million in 2001 to 61.6 million in 2011. However, the decadal comparison of the Census data shows a fall in the category of women as cultivators, indicative of a loss of access to cultivable agricultural lands. Census 2011 for India shows that out of total females counted as Workers, 65.1 percent are engaged in agriculture.

The second data set is the Agricultural Census, which is less reliable when it comes to counting land ownership. The latest Agricultural census (2015-2016)

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<sup>23</sup> <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/the-kisan-long-march-in-maharashtra/>

cites that “the percentage share of female operational holders has increased from 12.79 per cent in 2010-11 to 13.87 per cent in 2015-16”. In terms of operated area, the share of women increased from 10.36 percent to 11.57 percent.”

Moving to the NSSO data sets, we see that in the age group (25-59), rural women’s work to population ratios (WPR) fell from 58 percent to 48 percent between 2004-5 and 2011-12, and to 32 percent in 2017-18. Among rural women, the largest decline seems to have taken place in women categorised as unpaid family helpers – from 28 percent in 2004-5 to 12 per cent in 2017-18. In contrast, women counted as focusing solely on domestic duties increased from 21 per cent to 45 percent.

Delineating on Maharashtra, Seema Kulkarni said, “In Maharashtra women form 40 percent of the cultivators and 50 percent of the agricultural labourers as per Census 2011. Census also shows that of all the men workers 23 percent are cultivators and 30 percent are agricultural labourers. However, percentage of women involved as cultivators and agricultural labourers is slightly higher than men – 30 percent and 40 percent respectively. All of these data sets point to the fact that women’s paid labour in agriculture is declining but their presence is perhaps increasing. This may vary from region to region and needs to be backed by large scale studies at the primary level.”

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Further, Seema Kulkarni pointed out, “One of the main issues is that rural women are not recognised as workers and as farmers despite their presence in agriculture. In rural India, ownership to cultivable land and access to irrigated land determines economic and social wellbeing. Women’s lack of ownership to land has critical implications on their wellbeing as their access to land, water, forests, livestock and other resources and is largely mediated through men and the State. Land ownership is considered as an important criterion for the design and delivery of a range of schemes in agriculture and irrigation thereby excluding women across social groups from a sector where their presence is the highest. Implications are seen by way of lack of budgets for rural women farmers and workers, specially targeted schemes or programmes for example, lack of access to Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sanman scheme is one such example.”

At the ground level thus, we see women managing fallow lands while men are forced to out-migrate in search of work, managing the farms with no water or credit for farm inputs and facing the brunt of both the agrarian crisis as well as

that of caste and patriarchy. Most of women's work continues to be unpaid, which is rising over the years. Among cane cutters, non-contractual obligations of patronage force women and children to work outside of the wage relation. Advances given compel women and children to put in the extra hours of work to meet the demands of the employer.

“In the water stressed district of Ahmednagar, Maharashtra there were several instances where the employers commanded the right to use family labour for their own work, simply because they were providing water to the labourers. The deepening of the agrarian crisis has also meant that women are spending more time on the fields to save on expenses for hiring labour. In villages in Marathwada, the traditional systems of shared labour or Savad appear to be on the rise. In this system, women work on each other's farms to save on expenditures related to hiring of labour. This has implications on the landless probably having reduced opportunities for employment in their own villages and are forced to migrate seasonally or permanently,” added Kulkarni

Maharashtra which accounts for the largest number of farm suicides has a large number of women farmers who are widows. Denied any rights over resources and with the stigma and financial liabilities that they have to deal with, their plight is even worse.

“We do have numerous stories from the field that demonstrate the agency of women to rise under these harsh conditions. They are organising, fighting for land rights and for entitlements from government and are rebuilding their own lives. Many are also hoping to make a transition to low external input or organic farming. The plight of sugarcane cutters is a matter of concern and we are working on the issue. A large-scale survey of about a 1000 women cane cutters shows the abysmal health conditions of these women and increasing gynaecological morbidity. Poor access to public health services at the work site and poor living conditions are a matter of much concern. The Beed hysterectomies issue highlighted the poor health and the exploitative conditions under which women cane cutters work. The story may be similar to many other migrant women workers as well. Most of these women would prefer to work in their own villages if work was available. Whether it is public health, Public Distribution Scheme or the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) the plight of rural women across social and economic groups points to a failure of public policies and programmes,” said scholar activist Seema Kulkarni

“The less discussed issue however is the violence meted out against rural women at work sites and in public spaces in general. The everyday violence meted out

to migrant women, agricultural labourers is less documented and made visible. Women narrate numerous stories of how direct and indirect forms of violence are meted out to them when they try and access government schemes such as that of minimum support price. Migrant women in cane cutting, brick kilns, women from dalit, adivasi and nomadic tribes are constantly exposed to violence in myriad ways,” added Kulkarni

Discussing about rural distress affecting farm women during the current Covid 19 she said, “Much has been written about the current Covid -19 crisis and its overall impact on the farming community, migrant workers and labour. In Maharashtra, we have numerous stories of strawberry farmers, floriculture and horticulture farmers being affected. This is harvest time for wheat, bananas grapes etc. Export of grapes has been affected. Lack of labour due to the lockdown has meant that farmers are not able to harvest their produce at full capacity. The harvested produce in turn has not been able to reach the markets due to problems of transportation which are now being streamlined. Procurement has thus become a major concern for farmers. There are positive stories of the MAHAFPC, which has decentralised procurement centres and is now procuring produce from the farmers.”

Through a series of conference calls organised with Mahila Kisan Aadhar Manch (MAKAAM) partners and activists on the ground, it is evident that rural women are disproportionately affected due to the current crisis. Work has come to a complete halt in rural Maharashtra as elsewhere. With no wages in hand, most of the rural poor are struggling to make ends meet. The burden on single women, widowed women is especially high as they have relied entirely on daily wages through agricultural labour, MGNREGA, vegetable vending or other petty trades.”

Women engaged in livestock have not been able to move freely to graze their cattle and neither are they able to sell their produce. Their children depend on them for survival. The foremost concern that is staring at them is lack of food supplies for the household. Many of these single women either do not have a separate ration card in their name or it is not Aadhar seeded. This makes it difficult for them to access food supplies from the PDS. They thus are forced to resort to borrowing from shopkeepers that they have to return with interest at a later date or with other kinds of favours. Weekly markets have shut down and these were the spaces where women often bought their vegetables or other produce to sell. Transportation is becoming difficult for bringing in their produce to make door to door sales. Women are demanding that some spaces be made available where they could sell their produce,” said Seema Kulkarni



Although liquor is banned, men are now drinking more than before, gambling is on the rise and all of this has also led to increased violence against women. Women complain that police ignore overcrowding by men at liquor stalls and gambling sites, but they displace women vendors.

Asked about MAKAAM, Seema Kulkarni replied, “Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) is a national network of more than 200 organisations and individuals that include women farmers and workers themselves. MAKAAM has been fighting for recognition and voice for women farmers and their rights to entitlements. It has a presence in more than 22 states of the country and actively engages with communities in about 14 states of the country. It has taken up a range of issues at the state and national level, especially related to forest rights, women farmers from suicide affected households, transition to ecological farming and women as champions for the same, issues of women cane cutters and other migrant labourers, land rights for women to include private property as well as State lands, claiming rights to ceiling surpluses and other state lands for Dalit and Adivasi women. It supports the cause of rural farm women engaged in agriculture and allied activities, through research, policy engagement with governments, campaigns, public hearings, consultations, media outreach etc.”

Further, she said, “In the current Covid -19 crisis, we are reaching out to about 600 single and widowed women across 14 districts of Maharashtra with basic kits of food supplies. The food and soap kit includes not just the wheat and rice cereals that are part of the existing PDS, but also pulses that are grown locally and onions and potatoes as well. We know that this is a drop in the ocean, but we do hope that this can support the women at least until the government is able to streamline its processes of food distribution. Currently MAKAAM is working at two levels, one is by way of providing direct relief to women and second is to engage with the government to streamline the schemes that it has announced recently and also to chart a course for the post lockdown period.”

Asked about what needs to be done on an urgent basis to help women migrants in cities who have been left without food, water and any other system of support, Seema Kulkarni responded, by saying, “For both women migrants in cities and for rural women, a clearly worked out plan needs to be in place. In the immediate it is important to provide cooked meals and shelters for stranded migrants in the cities. Maharashtra government has announced some schemes towards this. The extension of Shiv Bhojan Thalīs to smaller towns is welcome, but it cannot reach the rural areas. The thalīs need to be provided free of cost for migrants who are stranded in the cities without any cash in hand. Like in the states of Delhi, Telangana etc, migrants should be given free food. In rural areas

where cooked meals cannot reach, it is important to provide adequate amounts of free ration supplies until they are able to tide over the crisis.”

For rural single and widowed women in Maharashtra, MAKAAM has raised an appeal for people to support. Seema Kulkarni requested to support the cause and contribute towards the basic food supplies for women. In Maharashtra the network is anchored by Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM).

Asked about the plight of the farm widows and had the agrarian crisis in Maharashtra resulted in an unprecedented number of female farmers’ suicide, Seema Kulkarni replied, “The current number of women farm suicides is largely invisibilized as they are not recognised as farmers. Suicides by housewives are higher than farm suicides, but we do not have a rural urban disaggregation or an occupation disaggregation in those suicide numbers and hence do not know how many among them would be women farmers. So we say that the data actually hides the numbers of women farmers ending their lives due to agrarian distress.”

However Telangana reports a higher number of women farmers’ suicides. The agrarian crisis is a gendered one and needs to be recognised as such resources are getting degraded, men are either migrating to cities in search of jobs or committing suicides due to the agrarian distress under these adverse conditions women are forced to farm and support their families. With declining investments in agriculture and commons like water, forests etc. women's unpaid work burden is increasing manifold and impacting their lives at multiple levels impact on health is one major concern.

Women cane cutters reproductive health issues were recently in the news with a large number of hysterectomies being done on them and a very large number of child marriages in this day and age among the cane cutters. Again women are invisible workers as they are part of the koyta which is a couple where the men negotiate with the contractors.

### **Maharashtra’s Adivasi women leader on way back from farmers’ protest died of cold**

56-year old Sitabai Ramdas Tadvi, an Adivasi woman farmer from Ambabari village of Nandurbar district on her way back died of cold on January 28, 2021. Tadvi had been fighting against the farm laws since June 2020, and had been at

the forefront of every agitation in Maharashtra, including the march against Reliance Industries in Mumbai on December 22, 2020<sup>24</sup>.

She had joined the 'Farmers Protest' at Haryana- Rajasthan Border on 17<sup>th</sup> January died "due to the cold". Sitabai Tadvi came at the protest site from Nandurbar district and had even participated in the tractor rally on January 26<sup>th</sup>. Tadvi was associated with the Lok Sangharsh Morcha of Maharashtra 1996 and had spearheaded various agitations over the years. She had been protesting with farmers at the Delhi border since December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and had left for Maharashtra on January 27<sup>th</sup> after she caught a chill. However, her condition deteriorated on the way and she passed away in Jaipur. We have been told she died due to extreme cold. She was adivasi farmer and her whole family is involved in this agitation.<sup>25</sup>

### **Adivasis of Maharashtra**

Maharashtra has a population of 11.42 crores (114.2 million) of which 9.35% are Adivasis categorized as Scheduled Tribes (ST), as per 2011 census. The state has second largest adivasi population in the country, next only to Madhya Pradesh. The state has 50,757 sq. km under the Tribal Sub-Plan which is 16.52 percent of the total geographical area (3, 07,313 Sq. Km) of the State. Raigad district in the Konkan region of the state has population of 26.3 lakh people out of which 11.58% are Adivasis. That's about a little more than 3 lakh<sup>26</sup>. The Adivasi population of the state constitutes 5.1 per cent of the country's Adivasi population. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 1976, have notified 46 adivasi communities in Maharashtra. Of these, two adivasi communities namely, Chodhara and Thoti have been notified with an area restriction<sup>27</sup>. Chodhara have been notified in all the districts of Maharashtra excluding the districts of Akola, Amravati, Bhandara, Gondiya, Buldana, Chandrapur, Nagpur, Wardha, Yavatmal, Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Nanded, Osmanabad, Latur, Parbhani and Hingoli districts. Thoti have been notified only in Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Nanded, Osmanabad, Latur, Parbhani, Hingoli and Chandrapur districts. Among the adivasi communities, Bhil, Gond, Koli Mahadev, Warli, Kokna and Thakur together constitute 73.3 per cent of the adivasi population of the state. Bhils are numerically the largest

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24 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/woman-farmers-protest-allegedly-dies-of-cold-7165209/>

25 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/woman-farmers-protest-allegedly-dies-of-cold-7165209/>

26 <https://www.indiafellow.org/blog/2019/09/who-are-the-katkari/>

27 [https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_st\\_maha.pdf](https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_maha.pdf)

adivasi community with a population of 25, 88,658 constituting 21.2 per cent of the state's adivasi population. Followed by Gond it's 1,554,894 (18.1 per cent), Koli Mahadev 1,227,562 (14.3 per cent), Warli 627,197 (7.3 per cent), Kokna 572,195 (6.7 per cent) and Thakur 487,696 (5.7 per cent). 19 adivasi communities in the state have a small population, each one are less than 1, 000 in population. Majority of the adivasi communities live in rural countryside. Among major adivasi communities, Bhil have the highest percentage of 95.2 percent living in the villages followed by Kokna with a percentage of 93.4, Warli with 92.7 per cent, Gond with 87.5 per cent, Thakur, another adivasi community has 86.3 per cent and Koli Mahadev with 80.3 per cent. The district-wise distribution of adivasi population shows that they have been returned in all 35 districts of the state with major distribution reported in the districts of Thane, Nashik, Nandurbar, Yavatmal, Nagpur and Dhule. These six districts account for 54 per cent of the adivasi population in the state.<sup>28</sup>

Among the adivasi communities of Maharashtra, Katkari have been designated a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), along with two other adivasi groups included in this sub-category, Madia Gond and the Kolam. It's among 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), as per the classification by Ministry of Home Affairs. Katkari are located primarily in Raigad, in parts of Palghar, Ratnagiri and Thane districts of Maharashtra and parts of Gujarat. Other names and spellings include Kathkari, Kathodi and Kathodia. Katkari derive their vulnerability from their history as a nomadic, forest-dwelling people listed by the British rulers under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a stigma that continues to this day. Kolams are located mainly in Yavatmal, Nanded, Osmanabad, Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts.

Katkaris are also known as Kathodis due to their old occupation of making Katha (Catechu), the thickened sap from wood of Khair (*Acacia catechu*). This primitive adivasi community work as agricultural labourers, sell firewood and wild fruits. Even catch fish for domestic consumption, toil in making charcoal and bricks. Dismal literacy rates, pathetic health conditions and minimal livelihood opportunities are some of the issues confronting the adivasis. In the aftermath of the pandemic Covid-19, during the lockdown Katkari tribal youth from Shahapur in Thane district had been selling Giloy and other products online. Giloy, scientifically known as *Tinospora Cordifolia*, Amrita or Guduchi in Hindi, is an herb that helps boost immunity. Giloy is beneficial for diabetic

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<sup>28</sup> [https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_st\\_maha.pdf](https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_maha.pdf)

patients as it is bitter in taste and helps in managing blood glucose levels. It also improves metabolism and is useful for weight management.

## **Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and Adivasis of Maharashtra**

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also called as FRA 2006 was enacted 14 years ago in December 2006. This Act recognises the historical injustice that Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) have been subjected to and seeks to secure their rights over the traditionally accessed and managed forest land and community forest resources. It also aims to move forest governance in the country to a democratic and community-based model. It recognises fourteen pre-existing rights of forest dwellers on all categories of forest lands, including protected areas. These rights are Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) and Community Forest Rights (CRs) to use and access forest lands and resources, Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights to use, manage and govern forests within traditional village boundaries.

The Maharashtra Governor, Bhagat Singh Koshiyari issued notification dated May 18, 2020 states that these Divisional Level Committees (DLCs) under chairmanship of divisional commissioners will hear appeals against the decision of the district committees headed by collector.

(<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/state-amends-fra-to-clear-more-claims-on-forest-land/articleshow/76048830.cms>)

In Maharashtra, 2,54,042 claims have been filed by Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 1,05,681 claims by other tribal forest dwellers. Of these, 13,712 claims of STs and 8,797 claims of others have been rejected. The notification states Governor took the decision in exercise of powers conferred on him by Schedule V of the Constitution.<sup>29</sup> The Governor modified Section 6 of the FRA 2006, in its application to scheduled area of Maharashtra. With latest decision, the government plans to give justice to the adivasis whose individual or community forest rights have been rejected<sup>30</sup>.

Fourteen years after the Central Government passed a law granting Adivasis and other forest dwellers rights to manage resources in forest lands,

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<sup>29</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/state-amends-fra-to-clear-more-claims-on-forest-land/articleshow/76048830.cms>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.im4change.org/latest-news-updates/ten-years-of-forest-rights-act-maharashtra-tops-in-implementation-but-credit-goes-to-one-district-mridula-chari-4682278.html>

Maharashtra has emerged as the front-runner among states in implementing the provisions of this legislation.<sup>31</sup>

### Gadchiroli and Gondia

Maharashtra's success came on the back of record recognition of Community Forest Rights (CFR) in Gadchiroli district. In a report published by Community Forest Rights- Learning and Advocacy (CFR-LA), it states, If Gadchiroli is taken out of the picture, Maharashtra's average performance of CFR [Community Forest Resource] Rights implementation as compared to the minimum potential [of forest land eligible for these rights] would be approximately 10%.<sup>32</sup> Maharashtra had granted villages Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights in 15% of land with the potential for these rights to be recognised. However, this was only because it had recognised these rights in 66% of the potential land in Gadchiroli.<sup>33</sup> In the rest of the state, there was no implementation at all in 21 districts, between 0% and 33% implementation in nine districts, and between 33% and 66% in two districts.

Maharashtra has granted CFRs in 15% of the 1.2 crore acres of potential forest land that could be eligible under these rules, benefitting 5,741 communities. Kerala is a close second at 14%, followed by Gujarat at 9% and Odisha at 5%. Across India, states have recognised only 3% of potential community forest rights.

Gadhchiroli has a glorious history of people's movement for land rights and the state's first employment guarantee schemes. The district has been centre of strong and protracted Adivasi movement, which is a significant point for the district's impressive performance. Adivasi groups have been at the forefront campaigning for the FRA for its enactment and pressure mounted by the movement ensured that in May 2008, the state notified rules for the Act and directed gram panchayats to begin holding meetings to file community forest rights claims<sup>34</sup>.

This was followed by a campaign for mass filing of claims, with technical inputs from civil society groups<sup>35</sup>. Mendha Lekha and Marda became the first two

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31 <https://www.im4change.org/latest-news-updates/ten-years-of-forest-rights-act-maharashtra-tops-in-implementation-but-credit-goes-to-one-district-mridula-chari-4682278.html>

32 <https://scroll.in/article/843046/ten-years-of-forest-rights-act-maharashtra-tops-in-mplementation-but-credit-goes-to-one-district>

33 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318489910\\_Promise\\_and\\_performance\\_of\\_the\\_forest\\_rights\\_act\\_A\\_ten-year\\_review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318489910_Promise_and_performance_of_the_forest_rights_act_A_ten-year_review)

34 <https://indiantribalheritage.org/?p=23920#gsc.tab=0>

35 <https://scroll.in/article/843046/ten-years-of-forest-rights-act-maharashtra-tops-in-implementation-but-credit-goes-to-one-district>

villages not only in Gadchiroli but in the entire country where CFR were recognised. The applications from these villages became the format for applications after 2012.

In and around majority of 1,200 villages in Gadchiroli manage to auction tendu leaves, used in the bidi industry, on their own, avoiding government tenders and spending on advertisements. Through this, villages were able to get as much as Rs 13,000 per bag, with an assurance of payment within six months, instead of a year, as is the case when auctions are managed by the forest department.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, even as Maharashtra is foremost in implementing CFR, it is also slowly attempting to reverse this with new forms of forest management.

In May 2014, the state notified village forest rules that already existed under the Indian Forests (Maharashtra) Act. These rules effectively transfer rights for the management of forest produce from communities back to the forest department. Villages have the right to choose between community forest rights and village forest rules – but without prior knowledge of either, have been guided towards opting for the latter.

Dilip Gode of Vidharbha Nature Conservation Society (VNCS) said, “We have a historical process started in the state with recognition of CFR and its post assertion. Management of Bamboo and Tendu is one example which is initiated by CFR Gram Sabhas. Collection of tendu by 12 Gram Sabhas, including 8 from our area (4 in Armori Dist. Gadchiroli, 4 in Deori, Gondia District from VNCS area) and rest 4 in Melghat by KHOJ pioneered collection and sale of Tendu leaves in 2013 and now by federating 175+GSs. This is the first process intimated in all over the country. We got government orders issued including CFR Village Management Plan where 50 villages have been covered, formation of an institution called Dist. Convergence Committee for its implementation, collection of MFPs from customary boundaries of CFR village including administrative boundaries and so on. All happened in the state as first of its kind. In our area in Gondia, Gadchiroli and Nagpur, we Gram Sabha have got Community rights over 90+ tanks. Many of them are desilted for restoration of biodiversity and proper water harvesting. Those are used for water harvesting, irrigation and inland fisheries. Gram Sabha of Dongartamashi village has set up hatchery.”

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36 <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/out-of-the-woods-how-the-fra-is-helping-a-village-in-maharashtra-during-the-covid-crisis/>

## **SRISHTI**

Society for Rural Initiatives in Sustainable and Holistic Themes in India (SRISHTI), which works in 70 to 80 villages, falling within 4 talukas, namely Korchi, Kurkheda, Desaiganj and Dhanora of Gadchiroli district. Keshav Gurnule, Chief Functionary of SRISHTI said, “1150 villages out of 1435 villages in Gadchiroli district have been accorded CFR titles. After the Gram Sabhas were accorded CFR titles, tendu leaves and bamboo are no more property of the panchayat but it belongs to Gram Sabha. Gram Sabhas which doesn't have bamboos to sell, they earn Rs. 20 to 30 lakhs from tendu leaves. Gram Sabhas having tendu leaves and bamboo to sell earn Rs. 50 to 60 lakhs in a year.

“Each family earns Rs. 30,000 to 50,000 a year. The Gram Sabhas maintain cash book, ledger books and get their accounts audited by a chartered account. They have their GST and VAT too. Gram Sabhas spend even in the developmental activities of the village, education and health. Now the Gram Sabhas are self-reliant and during the pandemic Covid-19, the villages have confronted the crisis doggedly and there has been no financial crisis,” added Keshav Gurnule.

As tendu leaves are Gram Sabha property, contractors have to pay a royalty to villagers. Every year, the contractors ask the villagers to collect the leaves, and pay their daily wages and a small royalty.

In Gadchiroli during the lockdown as an outcome to the pandemic COVID-19, the funds allocated for CFR were spent in distributing essential food supplies to the villagers as it happened in Kukdale village. Every villager was ensured food during the lockdown as Kukdale Gram Panchayat swung into action. The Panchayat bought vegetables from local sellers who had nowhere to sell their produce. Some supplies of grains, oil, and pulses from grocery stores were brought by them. These were then distributed amongst the residents of the village as weekly supplies.

## **AMHI AMCHYA AROGYASATHI**

Dr Satish Gogulwar, Convenor of Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi said, “Our focus is on livelihood issue confronting the adivasis, as our area has 70% forest. We are working in the villages of Kurkheda, Armori and Korchi talukas of Gadchiroli district. In 100 villages, we are working on CFR and in 300 villages on all the issues. Adivasis living in the villages where we are working were feeling detached from forest, as earlier they have to purchase the forest products.



“When the Joint Forest Management (JFM) came into force, then adivasis felt their rights are being addressed and they got the benefit to avail forest products<sup>37</sup>. Bribing the forest guard stopped. JFM was a scheme but not a law. When FRA 2006 was implemented, it came along with Community Forest Rights (CFR) and Individual Forest Rights (IFR). In Gadchiroli there had been long drawn struggle for the effective implementation of IFR. When we started working on CFR, the forest authorities were quite receptive. In Gadchiroli district, CFR titles have been accorded to 1160 Gram Sabhas out of 1435. In Korchi taluka, 80 Gram Sabhas has received CFR titles out of 130 Gram Sabhas and in Kurkheda taluka, two-third Gram Sabhas had been accorded CFR titles, one-third is yet to receive CFR titles. In 100 villages where we are working all of them have been accorded CFR titles. In some of the villages where we are operational, we started with Bamboo. Mendha Lekha in Gadchiroli was the first village to get CFR title in UPA-led Central Government, the then Union Minister of Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh came to handover Bamboo Transit Rights to the Gram Sabha, it was India’s first Gram Sabha, which was accorded CFR title, sold their bamboo. Tendu leaves are available in all the villages but not Bamboo. Traditionally the auction had been conducted by the Forest Department with the proceeds going to the state, the presumed owner of the forests. Gram Sabhas in Gadchiroli started receiving 85% of the royalty derived from tendu auctions, but there was gross under reporting of collection and royalty figures by traders and the Forest Department. Then, the Forest Department, or State, was still the owner of forests in this arrangement. There were lot of bungling during that time, as two-third of auction was reported and one-third was kept unreported<sup>38</sup>.

Earlier, the tendu trade was controlled by the Forest Department by carving forest areas into units, setting targets for production, employing adivasis for meagre wages to collect the leaves, and selling the produce to traders who would, in turn, sell it to bidi manufacturing units. Now after implementation of FRA, Gram Sabhas are given two options regarding the process each auction season, and asked to pick one. Under the first option, the Gram Sabhas are assisted by the Forest Department with the auction. Thus, the department calls for bids, signed agreement with the winning bidder, conducts the auction, and transfers the royalty amount acquired to the villagers' bank accounts. Under option two, the Gram Sabha conducts the auction independently though it can

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<sup>37</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint\\_Forest\\_Management](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joint_Forest_Management)

<sup>38</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/819849/adivasis-have-taken-charge-of-the-tendu-auction-in-gadchiroli-but-theres-room-for-improvement>

seek the help of the Forest Department and local administrative authorities<sup>39</sup>. The Gram Sabhas call for bids, sign agreements with the winning bidder, and conduct the auction. The winning bidder, however, pays the royalty amount to the Forest Department, which deducts an administrative fee and transfers the auction proceeds to the head of the zilla parishad, who transfers it to the Gram Sabha fund<sup>40</sup>,” added Dr. Satish Gogulwar

In 2017, 140 villages in the Korchi, Dhanora and Gadchiroli talukas formed Mahasangh, a federation and carried out the auction of tendu leaves. Each Gram Sabha contributes Rs. 5000 annually to Mahasangh for running its office and keeping the records. In 2017, villagers got Rs. 12,000 for a bag of 1000 bundle followed by Rs. 7500 in 2018 and Rs. 6500 in 2019. Villagers got a daily wage of Rs. 800. The money is transferred to the Gram Sabha account. Power Grid transmission line passed through the community-managed forests, the villagers approached the District Collector Shekhar Singh he was quick in responding and agreed to pay compensation to 19 Gram Sabhas of Korchi taluka. The amount of compensation ranged from Rs. 20 lakh to Rs. 2 crore. On March 18, 2020, the current district collector Deepak Singla froze the account of these 19 Gram Sabhas of Korchi taluka. But nothing was communicated to the villages about it. It came to the notice of the villages on April 16, 2020 when cheques issued by Kukdel, Gahanegata and Zankargondi villages to shopkeepers, against purchase of essential items <sup>41</sup>for villagers during the nationwide lockdown due to pandemic Covid-19, bounced. The villages have CFR that empowers them to manage the forest areas under their command and own forest produce in the area, such as tendu leaves and mahua flowers, which they can harvest, and sell and use the money for village development. The Gram Sabhas have their bank accounts operated by signatories authorised by and with consent of the Gram Sabhas.<sup>42</sup> The Maharashtra government has directed Gadchiroli Collector to immediately de-freeze the bank accounts of 19 Gram Sabhas, saying that no irregularity had been cited by him to the state government to justify his action. The Deputy Secretary of Tribal Development, on May 26, 2020 had stated that no violation of FRA, 2006, its rules of 2008 and amended rules of 2012 was cited in the letter issued to the bank or in any other documents made available

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39 <https://scroll.in/article/819849/adivasis-have-taken-charge-of-the-tendu-auction-in-gadchiroli-but-theres-room-for-improvement>

40 <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/gadchiroli-collector-freezes-accounts-of-19-gram-sabhas-6419959/>

41 <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/gadchiroli-collector-freezes-accounts-of-19-gram-sabhas-6419959/>

42 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-govt-asks-gadchiroli-collector-to-defreeze-accounts-of-19-gram-sabhas-6428658/>

by Collector's office<sup>43</sup>. Similarly, the District Collector had stated during his discussion with Principal Secretary, Tribal Development, that no specific complaint had been received by him regarding any irregularity in the operation of the back account. The freezing of account of the Gram Sabhas shows that there is a conspiracy to subvert the rights of the Gram Sabha. It's an attack to create hindrances in the ways of the Gram Sabha trying to become self-reliant. Political parties joined the bandwagon in opposing the Gram Sabhas.

## **Amravati**

### **KHOJ**

Payvihir, Nayakheda, Upatkhedha and Khatijapur villages in Amravati district, which falls within Khoj's area of operation, where villagers under CFR got the worst quality of forests, which was 990 hectare got CFR rights in 2012. Once a barren landscape has now been turned into full of greenery due to the efforts of these villages.

It has been possible with guidance Khoj Melghat these villages are implementing a management plan that includes plantation of mixed species, intensive soil and moisture conservation, removal of exotic and unwanted species, and restricted grazing. The Amravati Forest Division played a positive role of a facilitative agency by providing technical and financial support. The Gram Sabhas, led by the youth of the villages, retained the decision-making authority<sup>44</sup>. Payvihir Gram Sabha won the UNDP Biodiversity Award in 2014 for its exemplary work on decentralised forest governance. In 2016, the Nayakheda Gram Sabha also received the Sant Tukaram award from the Maharashtra government for its forest conservation efforts.<sup>45</sup>

CFR has also created tremendous employment opportunities in these villages where less than 35 per cent of the households own land. Rampant migration in these villages has been stopped with members from at least 70 per cent of the households travelling for more than six months of the year to cities in search of employment. But the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in CFR areas has generated longer days of employment and good wages in the four villages.

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43 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-govt-asks-gadchiroli-collector-to-defreeze-accounts-of-19-gram-sabhas-6428658/>

44 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/wildlife-and-biodiversity/forest-governance-2-0-59363>

45 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/wildlife-and-biodiversity/illegal-wildlife-trade-57731>

As Purnima Upadhyay, Chief functionary, Khoj Melghat said, “In Melghat there 310 odd villages, around 180 have got CFRs. Khoj works directly with 45 to 65 villages in 3 blocks, namely Achalpur, Chikhaldara and Dharni blocks of Amravati district. Khoj started with management plan but that has not been completed as per the FRA. Management plan, simultaneously working with people, it’s just not forest rights there are other issues also. Khoj worked on the issue of livelihood, convergence and forest governance. These were the 3 areas we work on convergence of laws, programmes and institution. These are key strategies which Khoj adopts in their areas of operation. The size of disbursement in CFR ranges from 35-50 hectares to 1350 hectares. It depends on village, traditional area etc. Korku tribe has been devoid of their traditional relationship of forest, which has been the main source of nutrition, with a break in that there has been direct result of their moving away from their traditional sources of livelihood. We don’t read into the older document of British days about malnutrition per se in this region that basically means malnutrition is somewhere linked to the deprivation caused due to the lack of nutrition emanating out of the forest laws, policies etc. That’s what one kind of factor one can really track back to. Khoj has been right from the beginning working on CFR, on rights of the people actually IFR long before, worked on rights of people over the land, we had High Court petition in 2000. Khoj has been working on the rights of the people over forest resources since we started working in 1990.”

Khoj has been working and the adivasis got their nistar rights in their villages. When FRA came into being, Khoj has been involved in training space, lending helping hand to the communities for filing their IFR and CFR claims and working with the Government for ensuring that the claims were recognised. For a long period the claims were stuck at the SDLC level, we should understand how the claims were processed for getting the claims approved. While working with the Government trying to address policy issues across in preparation of their management plan in post-CFR scenario working on convergence. So there has been several jobs has been initiated after a process that we did with UNDP for preparation of CFR management plan. As a culmination of that process there were certain Government regulations on formation of CFR Managing Committees (MCs) and Convergence Committee at the District level.

The Amravati experience is unique as it converges, various laws, governmental programmes and village-level institutions. Rights over CFR have provided

round-the-year livelihood to people, while regenerating forests and wildlife habitats.<sup>46</sup>

## Thane and Palghar

### Kashtakari Sanghatana

The Kashtakari Sanghatana working in the adivasi belt of Thane and Palghar districts comprising mainly of Dahanu, Talasari, Jawahar, Mokhada, Vikramgad, Wada, Palghar, Shahapur and Murbad talukas. Predominantly Warlis constitute 60% of the adivasi population in the area. Other adivasis living in the area are Katkaris, Konkanas, Mahadeo Kolis, Vanjaris, Dhodis and Dubalis.

Brian Lobo, a front ranking functionary of Kashtakari Sanghatana explaining about FRA and its involvement said, “Prior to FRA was implemented, the Kashtakari Sanghatana had always taken the position that the forest belongs to the forest-dwelling adivasis and therefore they should have the right over the forest. We had advocated that the forest belongs to adivasis and forest-dwelling communities. In our areas of operation, Community Forest Rights (CFR) titles have been granted. In some they have not so far. About 40 CFR titles have been granted in Dahanu taluka. In some of these areas, there has been training on planning and how to manage the forest, in certain areas people have not done that. Basically in Palghar district in Dahanu taluka, Kashtakari Sanghatana is active on this aspect. The size of the CFR approved is between 35 to 1100 hectares. Adivasis has been involved from the very beginning in the CFR process. A section of 8-15 people drawn from adivasi communities played a more active role since the beginning. In the post-CFR scenario, our organisation has involved the adivasi communities as much as possible. In 28 villages there is more involvement of the communities. 25 villages out of 28 have prepared a plan for CFR area, plans which includes rules for conservation, rules for management and plans how to draw about planning for CFR itself. Kashtakari Sanghatana has not stressed on incomes, either on kind or cash. This not an area where there has been sale or barter of MFPs, moreover in our region MFPs are less so there is no question of income from it. Some of the areas include like 1100 hectares include IFRs within CFR. Either some is of that nature or other are of not. The income from sale of produce or exchange is not there. It is very little from beginning in comparison to other parts of Maharashtra which is the Vidharba area where the entire CFR area has tendu leaf and bamboo this is not

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46 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/oct/02/role-of-gram-sabha-local-community-key-in-buildingresilience-among-tribal-communities-report-2204803.html>

an area of tendu leaf or bamboo. This is not CFR area where there is higher amount of exchange or sale that is not here therefore people have not got cash income for having control over the forest.”

“There are many more villages, which are yet to get their CFR titles. In the villages, where MFP is not very high, definitely there lots of people have conserved forest it’s definite that there is timber value of forest. Timber rights, which I understand is sustainable management of forest, timber rights should also be included as my understanding of CFR however it is not spelt out clearly in the FRA 2006 it’s an interpretation which we are doing. Therefore, there should be right of the community over timber rights should be recognized. That’s should be the one issue which have to be addressed in terms of strategy, that means you would have people, there are lot of timber in the forest, you are protecting forest and you are conserving it then what happens to the timber then altogether it goes to the Forest Department. Instead of sustainably managing the timber, sustainably managing the tendu leaf or the bamboo, nobody knows that you have timber rights it should not happen to finish off the forest. But it has to be done sustainably. People want to do that on that fashion. It is on their land which they are cultivating, it is there on the land beyond forest which they are cultivating,” added Brian Lobo

### **Post-Covid 19 and Role of Gram Sabha and Adivasi community in building resilience in Maharashtra**

Adivasi communities have been severely impacted by the pandemic and have been marginalised further with large-scale loss of livelihood options.

During the pandemic Adivasi and other traditional forest dwelling (OTFD) communities coped in better way with the crisis where their land and forest rights were recognised. The role of Gram Sabhas proved to be crucial when they were been empowered under the legislations of FRA, 2006 and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 (PESA).<sup>47</sup>

Where the provisions of the legislations were diligently implemented, there the recognition of rights led to overcoming constraints and crisis in a better way.

In the report produced CFR-LA and Vikalp Sangam initiative -- a platform which focuses on environmental issues, which states, “Securing tenure, recognising individual and collective rights, and support for Adivasi and OTFDs towards effective management, restoration and conservation of their customary

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/jul/29/tribal-body-starts-digital-drive-for-forest-dwellers-2176265.html>

forests, and autonomy of Gram Sabhas could reduce the need for distress out-migration as it could create ample livelihood opportunities<sup>48</sup>.”

Minor forest produce such as mahua, bamboo, tendu leaves and ownership rights over it created sustainable economies for the communities. Around 100 million forest dwellers depend on MFP for food, shelter, medicines and having cash with them, according to the Centre. They derive 20-40 per cent of their annual income from MFP<sup>49</sup>.

Gram Sabhas coming to the aid of the most vulnerable among the forest communities like women and children, landless families, pastoralists, particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) through collective resources generated from community forests, the report states.

Convergence of FRA and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and scaling up efforts for employment generation from individual forest rights and community forest rights can be an effective strategy to boost local economy in tribal areas, the report suggested<sup>50</sup>.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/oct/02/role-of-gram-sabha-local-community-key-in-buildingresilience-among-tribal-communities-report-2204803.html>

### **Adivasi community worst hit in the Pandemic**

The Adivasis from Maharashtra migrate to a whole range of employment. Those from Thane district migrate to the salt pans, brick kilns, sand dredgers, stone quarries and earth work for construction on the outskirts of Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. Those going to work on fishing boats are known to move as far south as Goa and up to Kutch and Saurashtra. A rapid census will show that the Adivasis of Thane, nearby Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Dharampur in Gujarat form the majority of fish workers on this long coastline. Many serve as tandels – captains of the boats. Adivasis from Raigad also migrate for work in the charcoal kilns. Migration is limited intra district to fruit farms, sugar plantations and industrial townships in Nashik and Aurangabad, while the Adivasis of Dhule and Nandurbar cross state borders for employment<sup>51</sup> in paddy fields, for sugarcane harvesting or construction in South Gujarat. The Adivasis

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48 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/jul/29/tribal-body-starts-digital-drive-for-forest-dwellers-2176265.html>

49 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/jul/29/tribal-body-starts-digital-drive-for-forest-dwellers-2176265.html>

50 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/jul/29/tribal-body-starts-digital-drive-for-forest-dwellers-2176265.html>

51 <https://www.labourfile.com/section-detail.php?aid=361>

of Amravati and Nagpur migrate as farm or construction labour to fruit orchards or nearby towns<sup>52</sup>.

These adivasi migrants, as a rule, work under harsh conditions, often in uninhabitable work sheds, toiling for 12 to 14 hours a day, for wages approximately half the legal minimum wage. They are denied benefits, including paid weekly off, sick leave, and casual leave, and are hired and fired at will by the employer<sup>53</sup>. Many adivasi workers are engaged in hazardous occupations without any protective gear or health cover. Others work on obsolete machinery and are regularly prone to industrial accidents.

The primitive adivasis who fall in PVTGs such as the Katkaris, Madia Gonds and Kolams live in abysmal habitations. These communities, especially the Katkaris and the *dor kolis*, have virtually no homes in their villages. Their houses, often a single room measuring 12 feet by 12, usually have reed walls plastered with mud paste and a roof of straw. When they migrate, the empty house is left to the elements. When these communities return, they try and repair the damaged dwelling, purchase straw for a makeshift roof, partly effective in keeping out the rains, and use the dwelling as their homes for the short period that the family is in the village. They complete their social requirements such as marriage, and live off their earnings for the two months when other labour activity stops and farm work is yet to begin<sup>54</sup>. Then they move on, and the homes are once again left to the elements.

However, the greatest man made humanitarian crisis since independence the Covid-19 pandemic played out across India, prevailing inequalities got intensified due to government policies and approaches during the arbitrarily declared, unplanned lockdown. The curtain of invisibility that hitherto concealed the existence of 10 crores of workers, termed migrant workers, has been torn asunder through myriad images of horrendous suffering<sup>55</sup>. This huge section of India's labour force or rather India's life force, majority of these workers are adivasis, who have been stripped of their rights as equal citizens of India. They are, along with all sections of the working class and working people whose basic rights are under attack, are hostage in the war that the PM Modi-led Central Government is waging to get out of the huge crisis that the capitalist economy faces. The package is a reflection of this class war. Millions of men and

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52 [https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524\\_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities](https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities)

53 <https://coronapolicyimpact.org/2020/05/01/inhuman-act-migrant-workers-sent-back-to-maharashtra-without-consultation/>

54 <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1001682/indias-caravan-of-misery-as-migrant-workers-desp.html>

55 <https://kochipost.com/2020/05/23/adivasi-communities-are-worst-hit-by-the-lockdown/>



women workers denied public transport forced to walk hundreds of kilometres is equally a reflection of this war. One aspect is their common suffering and exploitation with all other migrant workers. The second aspect is the specific deprivations adivasis face as adivasis, as forest dwellers or in villages in hilly areas, which has the specific impact of the lockdown and the so-called package on adivasi lives and livelihood.

In April 2020 in Nandurbar district of Maharashtra, migrant adivasi workers who went to Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh 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 Pradesh. Majority of adivasi 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 interstate movement can be permitted<sup>56</sup>.

The migration of adivasi workers had already started when the lockdown was suddenly imposed. In Maharashtra, adivasis are reporting that work has stopped the contractors often snubbed by the principal employer, have run away leaving the adivasis stranded. Adivasi migrants, since they are not part of the so-called mainstream cultures are even more vulnerable to the general hostility towards the poor displayed by State agencies particularly the police<sup>57</sup>. During the lockdown, unable to get assistance and despairing of any free travel home, adivasi migrants from Maharashtra like other migrants started the long and painful march home often avoiding highways, travelling through forests and side roads to avoid the police<sup>58</sup>. The Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979, the only law for migrant workers, is on the way to being scrapped by the Central Government led by Narendra Modi as part of its agenda of labour reform. It is to be merged with the labour code, which is an instrument to destroy the hard won rights of the working class. Although the 1979 law is quite inadequate since it deals only with those migrant workers in the contractor system and excludes workers who migrate on their own, for adivasi migrant workers employed through contractors, its implementation would have ensured payment as well as free travel back home. In fact according to the law, the Central Government is legally liable to ensure free travel home since it is responsible for the termination of the work emanating out of the lockdown. Most adivasi habitats have so far been free of the Corona virus. Adivasis are particularly vulnerable to

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56 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/playing-out-live-a-narrative-of-discrimination/article31560942.ece>

57 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/playing-out-live-a-narrative-of-discrimination/article31560942.ece>

58 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/playing-out-live-a-narrative-of-discrimination/article31560942.ece>

the virus if it is introduced in adivasi areas due to acute vulnerability caused by malnutrition, anaemia.

Instead of tackling the grave situation emerging out of pandemic in adivasi areas, the Central Government- led by Modi used the lockdown to further its pro-capitalist class agenda including in spheres which directly dilute the constitutional and legal rights of adivasis<sup>59</sup>. It is also in this period that the Supreme Court gave its highly questionable judgment against prevailing reservations in schoolteachers' posts for only Adivasis in Fifth Schedule areas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Many aspects of the judgment will have a negative impact on special constitutional provisions for adivasis under the Fifth Schedule beyond the issue of reservations<sup>60</sup>.

Adivasi migrant workers of Maharashtra were worst-affected people as they along with Dalits are the backbone of the large pool of migrant workers who faced discrimination back in their villages. Many of them moved to cities to escape the deeply entrenched social inequalities in rural areas but found their hopes of a better life dashed when the virus struck their villages<sup>61</sup>.

Health infrastructure in most of the adivasi villages is dismally low. Not a single rupee has been spent on strengthening the health infrastructure in adivasi areas<sup>62</sup>. The PDS functioning in adivasi areas is woefully negligible. Now at the time of lockdown, ground reports point to a looming emergency of hunger and starvation in many adivasi areas.<sup>63</sup> In areas where the Particularly Vulnerable Tribe Groups (PVTGs) live, the situation is very grave. Agriculture in adivasi villages is still mainly subsistence agriculture and only a very small proportion would be for the market.

However for their requirements, it is common for adivasi households to sell small quantities of their grain produce in local markets for the cash required for daily expenditures. During lockdown with the closure of local markets and trade, this has not been possible leading to a huge cash crisis in adivasi areas to buy any essential commodities<sup>64</sup>. In most adivasi populated areas, this collection done in substantial measure by adivasi women constitutes 40 to 60 per cent of annual cash income of adivasi communities. MFP collection was

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59 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/playing-out-live-a-narrative-of-discrimination/article31560942.ece>

60 <https://chahalacademy.com/current-affairs/12-MAY-2020/233>

61 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pandemic-teaches-a-tragic-lesson-in-migration/story-69EIk6MB70zNDX1VsRTx0J.html>

62 <https://www.ibpsguide.com/sbi-po-prelims-english-language-questions-day-01/>

63 [https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524\\_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities](https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities)

64 [https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524\\_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities](https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities)

allowed but the weekly markets, where most of the collected produce is sold was not allowed. Since the minor forest produce is perishable there has been a huge loss incurred by adivasi communities and forest dwellers on the issue of sale of MFP<sup>65</sup>. MNREGA, which can be of great help and the Central Government, gave permission for MNREGA only from April 20. At present, there are hardly any MNREGA works in adivasi areas. It is critical to start projects in a mission mode in adivasi areas if communities are to be saved from destitution. The MNREGA projects can and should be linked not only to agricultural operations but also for the collection of MFP. The lockdown with its destruction of livelihoods has caused more suffering to adivasis than the coronavirus<sup>66</sup>. But this has been compounded by the use of the lockdown by the Central Government to push through policies which have a devastating impact on adivasi rights.

In this period the Central Government has further liberalised mining regulations. This will lead to further displacement of adivasi communities since most mines are situated in adivasi inhabited areas. In the name of “ease of business” the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate change is fast tracking clearances for projects in forest areas. During the lockdown period proposals in protected areas in forest, tiger reserves, and sanctuaries have been considered for clearance. The essential requirement for consent adivasis is being violated. The proposed draft for dilution of the environment impact assessment for projects is a direct attack on constitutional provisions for protection of adivasi land, of PESA and the Forest Rights Act. The mandatory consultation and consent of Gram Sabhas for any such projects in Fifth Schedules Areas is sought to be eliminated. The most blatant attack has been in the use of CAMPA funds for afforestation without consultation with the Gram Sabhas. These funds are the compensation paid by industry for projects which have destroyed forests. At present there is a fund of around Rs 48,000 crores which is in the jurisdiction of state governments where the projects are. Adivasi communities have been the most affected—not only facing displacement by many such projects, but also denial of their rights to forest community resources by the felling of trees

### **Fisherfolk communities of Maharashtra**

Fisherfolk communities form an important component of Maharashtra. Koli fisherfolk community has been living for 500 years and working along the coastal waters of the seven islands that made the present day Mumbai city.

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<sup>65</sup> <https://kochipost.com/2020/05/23/adivasi-communities-are-worst-hit-by-the-lockdown/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://kochipost.com/2020/05/23/adivasi-communities-are-worst-hit-by-the-lockdown/>

As eminent historian DD Kosambi said, “In Marathi, Koli means the originally heterogeneous marginal tribe-castes that took late in history to agriculture and were often press-ganged for portage in army service. The same word also means spider and fisherman, presumably because the fisherman makes and uses a net to catch his prey as a spider his web<sup>67</sup>.

Kolis hold the strongest right to the title of Mumbai’s original residents. Islands like Kolbhat (now Colaba), Palva Bunder (now Apollo Bunder), Dongri, Mazagaon, Naigaum and Worli were named by the Kolis<sup>68</sup>. The name Mumbai owes its origin to the Mumbadevi temple in Dongri, worshipped by the Kolis. Around 5,00,000 Kolis are estimated to be living in and around the Mumbai, majority still making their living by fishing despite a very different world rising up all around them on the land, and arguably even more drastic changes taking place below the waters of the sea they depend on. Even today, most of their daily trade is done, as it has been since the late 1800s, at Sassoon Dock, at sunrise<sup>69</sup>.

Bombay, which is now Mumbai, when it started emerging as a modern city, then it began to slowly marginalising Kolis as they were from Dongri in 1770 by the East India Company. This historical process of elimination eventually pushed them to the strand near Cuffe Parade, from where they plied their ancient trade of deep water fishing<sup>70</sup>. The Backbay reclamation of the 1960's would have further marginalised them had they not approached the courts to stay the reclamation. Now their settlements are protected by law.

Kolis speak a variant of Marathi, which is called ‘Agri’, their dialect. Originally, the community belonged to the ethnic Marathi. The arrival of the Portuguese during 1500 and their subsequent rule over Bombay led to the conversion of the Kolis to Christianity. The town of Vasai is now home to Catholic settlements, which were originally of ethnic Kolis. Bassien, as Vasai was referred to by the Portuguese and later by the British, has remained as one of the major Koli settlements in northern Maharashtra<sup>71</sup>. The Kolis who follow Hindu religion have been segregated into sub-caste prominent among these are Mangela Kolis, Vaity Kolis, Mahadeo Kolis and Suryavanshi

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67 <https://enacademic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/545350>

68 <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/the-kolis-of-bombay-the-original-residents-of-the-city/>

69 <https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/the-kolis-one-of-the-oldest-fishing-communities-of-mumbai-face-an-uncertain-future-6500251.html>

70 <https://theory.tifr.res.in/bombay/history/ethnic/koli.html>

71 <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/the-kolis-of-bombay-the-original-residents-of-the-city/>

Generations of these Kolis have been in the fishing occupation as their sole profession for survival. In spite of being settled in and around Mumbai city, which prides in calling itself the first metropolitan city of India, the Koli community has still retained the core<sup>72</sup> of their traditional culture.

Kolis still distinguish themselves from the rest of the population in their customs and habits, and their social and religious life. This is largely due to their collective dependency on their only profession of fishing<sup>73</sup>. Since 1990s there has been rapid commercialization of fishing and related business activities like procurement, supply chain, and vending of the fishery products. Commercial fishing involving large corporations having license and territory demarcation use mechanized fishing using trawlers for catch. Also the profession has been infiltrated by other communities who had so far never been in this traditional profession. All these and many other socio-economic factors which have emerged lately have resulted in several challenges being posed for the Koli community of Mumbai.

Apart from Kolis, the fisherfolk communities in Maharashtra are Dhiwar, Bhoi and Gavit. Dhiwar are the caste of fishermen and palanquin – bearers deriving their name from a Sanskrit word ‘Dhiwara’, a fisherman. It has a large number of sub-divisions of a local or occupational nature. The Singadia or those who cultivate Singada nut, the Nadha or those who live on the banks of streams and the ‘Dhurias’, who sell parched rice. The occupations of Dhiwar are many and various primarily they are into fishing and operate boats. They are adept in various methods of river fishing and are regularly employed as a worker on a ferry. They monopolize growing Singade or water nuts in tanks, also grow melons, cucumbers and other vegetables on the sandy stretches along the banks of streams but at agriculture proper they do not excel. Their connection with water has led to them becoming the water-carrier. With the introduction of wheeled transport, their occupation as carriers of palanquins or litters has dwindled.

Bhoi is one of the fisherfolk communities in Maharashtra. Bhoi are traditionally dependent upon the river Adan for their subsistence. Due to depleting fish resources their lives are in danger. Bhoi's, the traditional fisherfolk community in Maharashtra are living in shoreline areas of the west coast of Maharashtra as well as near rivers, reservoirs, dams. Since ancient times Bhoi are known as Palkiche Bhoi, the tribe which wander all over carrying the Palkhi of king and

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72 <https://www.scipress.com/ILSHS.62.140.pdf>

73 <https://www.scipress.com/ILSHS.62.140>

their families as the loyal ones. Diminishing the rule of king's and kingdom these loyal people have returned to their traditional business – fishing. This community/tribe is mostly found in District of Ratnagiri, Sindhudurga, Raigad and Mumbai and in mostly all districts of Maharashtra where the fishing occupation is traditional carried out.

Gabit are a community found in the Konkan region Maharashtra extending to Goa and Karnataka. In Goa, they are distinct from the Kharvi community found mostly in the Southern part of that state, although they share a similar traditional occupation. The Gabits are primarily a fishing community and are concentrated in the northern talukas of Canacona, Pernem and Salcete. Generally, Gabit live in joint family but now moving towards the nuclear family is evident

Kolis and other fisherfolk communities are compelled to surrender their traditional habitat to land developers and touts as their traditional livelihood source is coming under the control of the 'outsiders'. Fisherfolk communities, especially the Kolis face threats to their traditional livelihood source of fishing from large scale mechanization after the fishing trawlers put into operation and influx of North Indians in fishing over the last 2 to 3 decades.

Indian fishermen buy the catch from wholesale commercial vendors and sell the fish at the doorsteps of the customer. The selling of fish has been traditionally done by the Koli women, who would collect the catch from their men folk and go regularly to the designated markets to vend the catch. This has been replaced by the North Indian men folk selling the fish locally without going to the designated markets. Due to sheer convenience of getting the catch at their door steps the customers avoid coming to the local markets for their purchases. These 'outsiders' have infringed upon the fisherfolk communities traditional livelihood and are posing a long term threat to their livelihood.

### **Fisherfolk communities and lockdown**

The coronavirus-enforced lockdown severely affected Maharashtra's fisher folk communities, especially in Mumbai as many of them were rendered jobless and found it hard to sustain their livelihood since fish markets were closed till August 2020. During the pandemic, small scale fisheries both in the inland and marine sector found it tough to continue fishing. Fisherfolk across the west coast of India threw away their fresh fish catch. In the absence of ice, there could not be any storage. The fish could not be sold as there were neither exporters nor traders. As there were no loaders for loading and unloading of fish, transport of stock and ice and other sundry jobs which were labour intensive and integral, which could not be done. The fisherfolk who returned from the sea

did not know what to do with their stock, so they threw it away or sold it at meagre prices.<sup>74</sup>

Fisherfolk communities across the economic spectrum – from the large scale mechanised fleets to the small scale fishers across the coastline suffered an economic blow due to continuous lockdown. Keeping in mind those marine capture fisheries is already a stressed sector the loss of fish created a dent in the economy and food security for a number of people.

Women, especially single women, who constitute a majority of fish vendors at markets, by the roadside, by head loading for door-to-door sale were hardest hit by the loss of access to fish, to transport systems, to markets, and to the consumers, Their day-to-day subsistence economy took a hit, so the impacts at the household level were severe. As nobody were going out and these women fish vendors could not go to people's homes and the markets were usually shut. Rules and policies that were in constant conflict are a feature of the lockdown and similar regulations were hurting the fishery business.<sup>75</sup>

The busiest fish markets, including at the Sassoon Dock in Colaba, Crawford Market in South Mumbai, Bhaucha Dhakka, or ferry wharf near the Dockyard, the Kasara fish market in Thane district and others, which used to be bustling with activity and business every day were shut. Thousands of fishing boats were lying useless and the fisherfolk were staring at a financial crisis.

### **Pastoral communities in Maharashtra**

Dhangars, a semi-nomadic group are an important pastoral community of Maharashtra. Most of them are shepherds, some were blanket weavers, and still, others are cow and buffalo herders, butchers and even occasionally farmers. The Dhangar shepherds stay in the central plateau of Maharashtra during the monsoon<sup>76</sup>. Dhangars look after large herds of sheep along with goats, buffaloes, horses, dogs and chicken. Known as Hatkar Dhangars they are into sheep-rearing spread over many districts of Maharashtra. Trekking long distances with sheep from village to village in Maharashtra, the Hatkar Dhangars are invited by the farmers to stay in their farmlands just before the sowing season. Sheep droppings are good manure for the fields<sup>77</sup>. Sheep are made to sit in a farm on the farmer's request for a number of days in *wada*, a fenced area. During the day, the sheep are taken away to graze in the fields. The

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74 <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/04/fishers-try-to-stay-afloat-amid-lockdown/>

75 <https://www.newsclick.in/Clarity-Rules-Leaves-Maharashtra-Fishermen-Struggling-Lockdown>

76 <https://freeguruhelpline.com/ncert-pastoralists-in-the-modern-world/>

77 <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/no-land-nomads>

fenced areas are shifted from time to time and the sheep droppings provide manure in the fields<sup>78</sup>. The Hatkar Dhangars are paid a rent by the farmers for providing them manure. Farmers and Dhangars used to have healthy relationship with each other, thus farmers providing them with fodder and also used to get grains in exchange of the manure. This used to help the farmer in waste management and also provide them with organic fertilizers<sup>79</sup>.

As farmers have started adopting modern techniques of farming, they have begun using synthetic fertilizers which has resulted in a drop in the demand for organic fertilizers provided by the Dhangars. Farmers have begun using pesticides to protect their crops from various diseases which might also end up killing the sheep if they eat fodder from such farms. The shift from the traditional ways of farming to the modern ways has affected the relationship of Dhangars and farmers, which was dependent on the exchange of manure and grains.

Dhangars use the entire grassland landscape and move over large distances depending on the rains, water sources and fodder with their large herds of sheep and goats. Dhangars also sell sheep wool in the cities. Sheep milk is also sold on demand but it is mostly used at their homes. The lambs are separated from the sheep which are often taken out for grazing. Lambs are kept in a special place where they are taken care of and fed during the day<sup>80</sup>.

Apart from Dhangar, pastoral communities include Kurumar, Krishna Golla and Kuruba communities the Deccan. The cattle herding include Nanda Gawlis., Melghat Gawlis, Mathura Banjaras, Golkars and Maldharis.

Nand Gawali, another pastoral community that has settled in and around Bor Forest in Wardha district of Maharashtra<sup>81</sup>. Their main source of income is pastoralism and agriculture contributes further to their livelihood. With shrinking grazing lands and restrictions on grazing cattle in forest land, Nand Gawalis find pastoralism unviable. The custom of farmers paying pastoralists is

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78 <https://yourstory.com/2017/04/no-land-nomads/>

79 <https://www.groundxero.in/2019/07/18/attack-on-nomadic-shepherding-community-members-in-maharashtra/#:~:text=Nomadic%20shepherds%20often%20provide%20manure,healthy%20relationship%20with%20each%20other.>

80 <https://www.groundxero.in/2019/07/18/attack-on-nomadic-shepherding-community-members-in-maharashtra/#:~:text=Nomadic%20shepherds%20often%20provide%20manure,healthy%20relationship%20with%20each%20other.>

81 <https://www.villagesquare.in/2020/02/07/nand-gawalis-struggle-to-sustain-pastoralist-lifestyle/>



also disappearing. This has led to many pastoralists quitting their traditional lifestyle and shifting to alternate livelihoods.

During the seasonal migration period of February to June, pastoralists travel more than 20 km along Wardha River with their animals<sup>82</sup>. The age-old practice of seasonal migration for fodder is changing rapidly for Nand Gawalis<sup>83</sup>. Many of them used to hire labourers during migration but with other lucrative livelihood options available in and around their village, workers are no longer available for hire. Absentee herding and sedentary pastoralism are a growing phenomenon. The custom of farmers paying pastoralists to graze on their farmland has disappeared at the migrated places. Villagers complained that the availability and quality of fodder in the migrated areas have decreased of late and they had to purchase fodder from landowners to feed their cattle<sup>84</sup>.

The families return to the villages before the start of monsoon. For the rest of the period, they sustain their cattle by grazing the animals in the forest grazing land, as well as by feeding crop stubbles<sup>85</sup>.

The community takes pride that once the number of livestock was more than double the village population and that they exported ghee and khoa to Manchester in the United Kingdom. But the scenario has changed.

Changes in fodder availability in the forest, as well as migrated places, have affected livestock number. Many families have reduced the number of their livestock on purpose. Of late, the maintenance cost of livestock has increased substantially. Though the market price for milk and dairy products has increased, with the absence of a formal market channel and the presence of middlemen, it is just break-even for<sup>86</sup> the pastoralists.

Under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), more than 1,000 hectare was incorporated under the forest. Villagers have been given the right to access the forest. However, pastoral communities have not been recognized under the FRA<sup>87</sup>.

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82 <https://www.villagesquare.in/2020/02/07/nand-gawalis-struggle-to-sustain-pastoralist-lifestyle/>

83 <http://epc2020.popconf.org/abstracts/200742>

84 <https://www.villagesquare.in/2020/02/07/nand-gawalis-struggle-to-sustain-pastoralist-lifestyle/#:~:text=Absentee%20herding%20and%20sedentary%20pastoralism,disappeared%20at%20the%20migrated%20places.>

85 <https://www.villagesquare.in/2020/02/07/nand-gawalis-struggle-to-sustain-pastoralist-lifestyle/>

86 <https://www.toppr.com/guides/history/pastoralists-in-the-modern-world/pastoral-nomad-and-their-movements/>

87 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/nomads-fenced-in-36863>

Further, FRA has so far recognized individual rights over the forest but has ignored the Community Forest Rights in Wardha district. Forest area is being expanded without considering the rights of people dwelling in the buffer region of the forest.

Migration and constant mobility in pastoral lifestyle are considered as adaptive mechanisms to deal with climate vagaries. However, because of a combination of reasons mentioned above, age-old customs are changing<sup>88</sup>. It becomes imperative to understand pastoral ecosystems and develop institutional programmes to enhance the livelihood security of these communities

Before the monsoon hits the pastoralists migrate to the plateaus, because heavy rainfall does not suite<sup>89</sup>. Confronting pressure from shrinking grazing land and rising hostility of farmers who once used to await their arrival had added to their woes. No forestland is left to support animals of other states. If pastoralists wish to graze their animals, they must do so on private land and present documents to that effect—written certification from the concerned land owner expressing availability of fodder. In case of illegal grazing, owners can be arrested and their cattle can be confiscated permanently. Whether the resolution has been implemented by the forest department is not clear. Gram Sabhas in Gadchiroli have reported presence of sheep and goat herds in forested areas, which is banned by the resolution<sup>90</sup>. As it happened in Gadchiroli where there have been violent clashes between the two Gram Sabhas. In Gadchiroli, the pastoralists are at the mercy of other forest dwellers. Hardly any forest is left in Gadchiroli, which does not have Community Forest Rights (CFR) title but pastoralists have no grazing rights.

For eight months they graze their sheep by day in open forest lands, fields, by rivers and streams and camp in temporary shelters by night under the same open sky as the wolves. More recently, because of changes in agriculture cropping patterns and the preference of farmers for synthetic chemical fertilizers, shepherds have had to find alternate grazing grounds<sup>91</sup>. Some even migrate east to the districts of Latur and Beed in Marathwada.

Worsening ecological conditions and dwindling area of pasture lands are forcing pastoralists and to trek long distances in search of water and fodder.

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88 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/forests/nomads-fenced-in-36863>

89 [https://www.india-seminar.com/2010/613/613\\_nitya\\_](https://www.india-seminar.com/2010/613/613_nitya_)

90 <https://www.groundxero.in/2019/07/18/attack-on-nomadic-shepherding-community-members-in-maharashtra/>

91 <https://www.groundxero.in/2019/07/18/attack-on-nomadic-shepherding-community-members-in-maharashtra/>

This is forcing changes in their traditional nomadic routines, as they are forced to seek out new nomadic routes. While exploring new routes of migration, pastoralists often face hostility from local village populations. Changing migration routes also means that such families have to deal with the issue of safety – both of humans and of livestock – from such atrocities<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>92</sup> <https://www.groundxero.in/2019/07/18/attack-on-nomadic-shepherding-community-members-in-maharashtra/>