

Environmental Dimensions of Tribal Sustainability: An Analysis of Belief Systems and Economic Status of Warlis and Dhor Kolis in Palghar and Thane District*

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*Acknowledgement: The article is based on the excerpts of the report submitted in April 2021 to ICSSR, IMPRESS, New Delhi, for Major Research Project entitled 'A Study of Belief Systems, Environmental Practices of Sahayadri Zone Tribes with Special Reference to Warlis and Dhorkoli's'.

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“Our history is not written, it is drawn: we tell you stories, we tell you about our life.”

– Divya Soma Mashe, the great international Warli Art painter.

I. Introduction

The tribal population also known as the indigenous community varies in terms of languages, cultural values, and socio-economic conditions in which they live. In India, the tribal communities are classified as Scheduled Tribes. The Scheduled Tribe are dependent on the forest for their variety of needs, including livelihoods, habitation and other socio-cultural needs. Their major source of income is based on agriculture and forest activities. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) of India are among the most marginalized groups in society because of their exclusion and socio-economic backwardness. In India, there are 104.5 million Scheduled Tribe people, or 8.63 per cent of the overall population, according to the 2011 census. In 2011, there were 10.5 million tribal people in Maharashtra or 9.35 per cent of the state's total population. Maharashtra, which makes up 10% of all STs in India, has the second-largest tribal population in the nation after Madhya Pradesh (Census Report 2011). The larger part of the tribals in India belong to nine states Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. The way of living and habitants of each tribal

community is exceptional and connected to the utilization of particular natural aids and work. They collect forest goods without rendering any impairment to the forest. The forest is the source of livelihood for indigenous people. Tribals use wild plants as medications and as source of income for their livelihood.

The lifestyle and tradition of each indigenous community are unique and are related to the utilization of particular natural resources and particular types of work. They have been collecting resources from the forest without causing any damage to it. The number of wild plants used as medicines by tribal groups contributes significantly to their livelihood and food security (Mahaprata and Panda 2012). In India, the financial exploitation of tribes by non-tribes and forest contractors has hampered their expenditure and income. Still, this kind of exploitation has been going on which is visible from their mass poverty, literacy, low level of urbanization, modernization, poor communication and extreme poverty conditions (Pawar 2015). This brings us to the aim of the research which was to study the environmental linkages between tribal societies and nature, to study and collect folklore, belief systems, and document stories and specific words used by Warli and Dhor Koli as well as study the impact of urbanization and globalization on expenditure and income of Warli and Dhor Koli tribes in the selected area.

II. Studies on interrelationship between Environment and Tribal Sustainability

Current environmental philosophers propose recognizing 'ecological wisdom' found in the different cultural traditions. Aldo Leopold's book *A Sand County Almanac*, in particular the important essay titled "The Land Ethic," in which Leopold explicitly asserted on the philosophical roots of the ecological crisis (New World Encyclopedia 2017), as well as Munir Hossain Talukder's book *Companionship with Nature in Asian Traditions*, reflect this viewpoint (Talukder 2019). Virginus Xaxa, a tribal expert, notes in "Empowerment of Tribes" that "tribes in India are not a homogeneous category. They differ greatly from one another in terms of the places they call home, the languages they speak, the physical characteristics they exhibit, the geographical terrain they call home, the ways they live, the

stages of development they are situated at, and the size of the community they represent" (Xaxa 2001, 205).

The tribe's main issues are poverty, lack of drinking water facilities, limited education, and outmoded agricultural practices. The position of the indigenous population can be greatly improved by the efficient implementation of government initiatives (Kulkarni 1980). Tribals in Maharashtra, which is one of the advanced states, have not benefited from its developmental schemes. The parameters like literacy, female literacy, level of urbanization, work participation, percentage of workers in the non-agricultural sector and sex ratio are very low for tribes in Maharashtra (Pawar 2015). Several development initiatives have been made by the federal government and state governments over the past five to six decades to better the socio-economic circumstances of the tribal people. However, tribal development is still present concern due to issues like poverty, land, and health, forced migration, and the impact of growing industrial and urbanization on people that live in forests. (Nithaya 2018).

The fundamental goals of tribal development are to foster sustainable development of the tribal community while preserving the distinctive identities and culture of these people and to guarantee an enabling ecosystem of equal opportunity for education, health, and livelihood. They must be integrated into mainstream growth, but attention to their socio-cultural identity's maintenance and sensitivity is also required (Upadhaya 2018). Tribals' lack of access to education has inexorably been linked by studies to their dismal economic circumstances and poverty. Agriculture, which is the main source of income for tribal people, is primarily conducted on terraces or through shifting cultivation, both of which have relatively low productivity. Children, therefore, play a significant role in the home, contributing either directly or indirectly to the family's income by helping with chores like grazing the family's cattle or collecting fuel and fodder. (Sujhata 2002).

The Warli worldview, in particular, contradicts our metropolitan logic and reason, as do tribal worldviews in general. "Their ideas of morality and rights are derived from nature. For instance, they refuse to milk a cow because they believe only the calf has a claim to the milk. A mouse also fights for their fair piece of the produce.

Nothing is accomplished in a vacuum. The Warli world is one circular circle, not divided like other cultures. Their ceremonies, agriculture, folklore, and art all represent their awareness. Their Warli painting is a modest ode to life” (Tamarind Tree 2021).¹

III. Research Methodology

This research was an attempt to study the belief systems and environmental practices comprising ecological wisdom and knowledge, social life, culture, religion, tribal philosophy, ancestral wisdom, folklore, economic features, faith, entertainment, rituals and festivals of the Warli and Dhor Koli tribes. The study was mainly based on primary data, which was collected by conducting intensive fieldwork in the Palghar and Thane districts of Maharashtra. The field investigators used the method of focused group discussion especially with understanding the philosophical belief systems and individual study method for obtaining data from the perspective of sociology and economics. For this study a questionnaire was devised and filled up in Palghar district of Maharashtra, under talukas of Mokhada and Jawar District out of which nineteen tribal villages were selected viz., Thakurwadi, Shivli, Phanaspada, Gonde khu, Ampepana, Tadyachapada, Sonarwadi, Dhamansheth, Ramwadi, Koshimsheth, Kavadpada, Sadakwadi, Loharpada, Durgaadi, Banachiwadi, Jamsar, Bedukpada, Sawardewadi and Poshera. While conducting the research various socio-economic characteristics comprising the following aspects: B.P.L. status, occupation, savings, debt, the income of the household, the status of the tribal sub-plan, housing facilities, toilet facilities, bathing, drainage facilities, electricity, fixtures and furniture, migration, educational facilities and health of the Warli and Dhor Koli tribes located in Palghar districts of Maharashtra were deeply investigated. It was observed that for the interview and focused group discussions a larger number of males were present as compared to females.

1 World of Warli, Tamarind Tree Project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiECWsqInK8>, Accessed March 02, 2021.

IV. Observation of the Study

a. The Warlis and Dhor Koli Tribes of Maharashtra

The belief systems, practices, art, myths, narratives, ethos, and values of tribal villages in India have suffered due to the Eurocentric model of development. The research work focused on the Warlis and the Dhor Kolis tribes of the Sahyadri region of Maharashtra and we engaged with them to study their belief systems and environmental and economical practices so as to help us understand the intimate relationship that tribals share with nature as well as the moral and spiritual connection with nature. We also attempted to analyze the impact of urbanization and globalization on their daily life and decisions during the past few decades.

The Warli tribes are located mostly in the hilly tracts along the West coast in northern Maharashtra and southern Gujarat. This ethnographic study was made in Thane and Palghar districts where their largest numbers are found. However, they are also scattered through the adjacent areas, though in much smaller numbers. “The Dhor Koli have derived their name from the word dhor, meaning animal flesh, specifically the flesh of a cow. They are considered to be a low untouchable tribe. the Dhor Koli tribe suffer from the advent of poverty” (Kulkarni 2015, 47). In Thana they are concentrated in Mokhada and Jawhar. In Thane district, out of a total tribal population of 7,29,424 they constitute 3,23,791, with concentrations mainly in Talasari, Dahanu, Palaghar and Jawhar talukas.

b. The Philosophical Perspective

‘Nature is created by God and is omnipresent’ is the principal belief of the Warlis and the Dhor-Kolis. According to them, nature is all-powerful. If nature decides, creatures can be destroyed in a few moments. These tribes consider themselves to be Hindus. But now there is confusion among the tribals, they say that Hindus and tribals are different. Therefore, some people write their religion as tribal and some people as Hindu. Hirva, Khandoba, Bahiri, Bhavani, Mariai, Himaya, Kansari, Narayan Dev, and Waghya, are the gods associated with nature, as such, they are

asked to not believe in Maruti, Ram, Ganpati, or Shankar. Lord Rama is considered to be one of the Gods of the Warlis and Dhor Kolis. They remember their Lord and thus they greet everyone by saying 'Ram-Ram.' These tribes hold the Sun and the Moon in high esteem. The only God who is said to "show himself" is the Sun. Rain is regarded as a Pavasha deva since he aids in the growth of their crops.

The Waghoba or Waghya, Tiger God, is worshipped by the Warlis. He is the tribe's main deity. Every hamlet has a representation of the tiger deity in the form of a standing stone under a tree that is typically cylindrical in shape. In the ground, the stone is partially buried. In the case of the idea of the universe, however, these tribes are opposed to science. Many things in science are still not acceptable to these people. There is a deep influence (and belief in concepts) of the creation of the human race, God, demons, ghosts, and tantra-mantra on these tribes. They have an unflinching faith that their deities will protect them, so their emphasis is on serving these gods.

c. The Idea of Ethics and Morality:

Ancestral traditions seem appropriate to the Warli and Dhor-Koli tribes. The community does not readily accept outside customs and norms. According to them, if we break our ancestral customs and traditions, then the existence of our caste will be destroyed. They have a firm conviction that "all the customs in our society are right, they are the symbol of our tribe and that it is wrong to imitate rules and regulations which are external to our tribe." Thus, morality and righteousness according to the Warlis and the Dhor-Kolis is adhering to the ancestral norms and regulations.

d. The Idea of Nature and God:

The Warlis and Dhor-Kolis are convinced that nature and God are superior to human beings. It is evident from the fact that human beings have not been able to control air, water and fire till date. Nature and God are all powerful and have attained divinity. On the contrary, human beings are being punished for the degradation of nature. That is why erratic rains, floods, storms, and communicable diseases are on the rise. If it is not controlled in time, the destruction of nature is inevitable. Due to large-scale industrial production, polluted wastewater is discharged into the river, which worsens the rivers. The government and the

people are responsible for the increase in heat caused by the falling of trees and the decrease in the amount of rainwater. They are of the opinion that all the above is happening as the injustice done to God. The tribals have firm belief that since trees, water, animals and birds are deities in tribal religion, if they are preserved, protected, and increased in number, nature will change its approach towards the living and non-living species of the environment and the earlier days of happiness, abundance and wisdom will come again. For them, "Nature and God are not different. Nature is God and God is Nature."

The oral tradition practised by the Warli tribe involves the transmission of knowledge through stories and songs to succeeding generations. In particular, their "Warli Paintings" demonstrate the Warlis' respect for nature. Their characteristic narrative paintings, which represent scenes that inform us about their beliefs and traditions, the rhythm of daily life, the cycle of the seasons, their joys and sorrows, are an integral component of this storytelling. It is a language that transcends words and uses visual communication, making it a useful tool for expressing stories that may span communities and continents (Garriock 2016). The Warli art is their language to communicate in story form about their lives and to portray their respect for nature and its creatures.

This study also documented the environmental vocabulary, vocabulary of objects, relations, customs, occupations, eating, dressing, religion, astrological words, days of the week, vehicles etc. of the Warlis and the Dhor-Kolis. From their vocabulary and interactions, we can make out their distinct naiveness which is quite different from that of the city folk.

e. Agricultural wisdom and rituals of the Warlis and Dhor Kolis:

According to the Warlis, the woodlands and their fruits appeared first. The woodland spirits are coveted, revered, worshipped, and have life for the Warlis. Their interaction with the forest spirits is a reflection of their ecological expertise. The Warli way of thinking contradicts urban logic and reason. "Their ideas of morality and rights are derived from nature. For instance, they refuse to milk a cow because they believe only the calf has a claim to the milk. A mouse also fights for their fair piece of the produce. Nothing is accomplished in a vacuum. The Warli world is one circular circle, not divided like other cultures. Their ceremonies,

agriculture, folklore, and art all represent their awareness. Their Warli painting is a modest ode to life.” (Tamarind Tree Project 2021).² This itself demonstrates that tribal morality is non-anthropocentric. Animal ethics is what the tribals inherently value and function accordingly. It means the tribal belief systems function on the idea that there should be moral consideration of animals and they should be treated with respect.

The Warlis believe that conserving nature and taking care of animals is not an act of selflessness on the part of humans, but the only way to protect their own future and well-being. It was enlightening to note how the Dhor-Koli and Warli communities have developed a surprising set of eco-indicators, wherein they can predict the coming of the monsoon. Minute changes in sunrise and sunset and the cry of a particular bird, are messengers of the onset of the rainy season. A new cycle of life starts with the first rain in June. We were fortunate to witness the worship of wild vegetables after the first rain called Kovalī bhaji.

f. Changing structure of marriage rituals

Among the ceremonies that the tribe performs the marriage ceremony is the most important. The marriage duration has been reduced from seven days to three days. The tribes follow old rituals and the groom's family offers new clothes, rice and a cash (minimum of Rs. 1500) to the bride. They cook mutton/chicken, wangi aloo, rice and tur dal and in sweets, they offer rice laddoo and bundi. There were few families which did not have sweet preparation in the wedding festivities. The minimum wedding expenditure is Rs 50 to Rs. 60,000. Relatives and neighbours do not help with cash but come to assist the family at the time of the wedding. A song sung in a wedding is narrated below:

Lagna (Marriage) Song:

सारे देव मंडपी आले, ये देवांच्या पडवळी बसल्या
पाची बोटे राम राम केला, दिला याला बसकर
ओढाया दिल्या भांगी तंबाखी

कहाण्या गोष्टी करू लागला (Personal discussion of the authors with Warlis, February 25, 2021, while interacting with them warlis, had sung songs).

g. Language

In many cases, both the tribes spoke Marathi and Hindi languages. Under the Warli tribes they do speak the warli language at their household level with their family. They were comfortable with the Hindi language as they migrated to other cities for work. Most of the tribes spoke Marathi and Hindi languages both covering 48% and some spoke only Marathi comprising 44% and the remaining 8 % spoke both Warli and Marathi languages out of 160 sample population. The Warli language demonstrates the effects of urbanization, cultural blending, and influence.

V. Economics Perspective

We observed that the living conditions of this tribal community are more like the people on or below the poverty line. Many families are nuclear with a minimum of 2 children. The majority of these families are residing in the villages for more than 50 years. The majority of the tribal population is engaged in agriculture and works as agricultural labour. Both husband and wife go to work together on the farmlands. Very few tribes have their land; a total of 90.63% of the tribe are engaged in agricultural labour. A very insignificant amount of labour is engaged in self-employment and service and it comprises 1.25 and 8.12% of the total sample tribal population. Limited tribes were employed under MNREGA programmers and had job cards for farm-related work, brick masons and factory work. Some have small shops that sell vegetables, and small ration shops and are self-employed. However, these labourers migrate for four months in a year as agricultural labour, which is the cause of concern for their children in the age group belonging to school-going age.

We studied their living requirements while observing their houses. The Dhor-Koli and Warli colonies are known as a wadi. The houses are impartial or rectangular sheds built on a coating of ground with or without a forum. The fabric consists of sticks, bamboo, wooden poles, and rice hay, mud and cow-dung plaster. This shows that they are dependent on natural objects for their houses without harming the environment. However, we found some of the houses were pukka houses indicating impact of urbanization. So, it is a mixture of very few techniques

of modernization but still having more dependence on nature for their living conditions.

A significant part of their revenue is expended on nutrition. The Warlis and Dhor-Kolis are non-vegetarian. Their eating habits are dependent on nature. They eat wild rabbits, goats, pigeons, and dry fish and their favourite non-vegetarian dish is chicken meat. They mix dal and dry fish and eat them with rotlas (stuffy nagli bread). Nagli and rice are their tack food. Rice is enjoyed with chutney. Pulse like urad (green gram), and tur (pigeon pea) are an important part of their diet. They start their morning breakfast with rice-gruel. During the winter season, they eat vora and wild roots. Besides these, they eat spinach and several green vegetables (raanbhajya i.e., legumes). Both the tribal members use palmolive and groundnut oil for making food. They brew liquor composed of mahua and molasses for their consumption and stockpile for others also. Seasonal fruits which they get from the forest are consumed occasionally. Using milk for the preparation of tea is very limited due to the non-availability of milk. Sometimes they use goat milk which has medicinal value for them.

It was observed that the majority of the tribes visited the government hospital but also used Ayurveda medicine for colds and coughs. Medicines were provided free in government hospitals but in the case of saline and stitches, the bare minimum amount was charged by the hospital. Many of the old members of the families were acquainted with the medicinal values of herbs from the forest and were using them for health issues. The small villages which we surveyed did not have appropriate health facilities, and the health centers had inadequate resources.

While checking the gender status we realized that though tribes follow matriarchy, the system is influenced by patriarchal norms. Women look after the entire household work. It is the female member who fills the water from the public tap and well and does all the household chores. They also contribute their help to agricultural lands. There was a difference of around Rs.50-100 concerning their payment. It was observed that most of the Dhor-Koli women were uneducated and gave a thumb impression instead of signing, whereas women in the Warli tribes were comparatively educated. However, the area has a poor literacy ratio.

The majority of tribes on average earns Rs. 150–200 for men and Rs. 100–150 for women and have worked most for 15 days of the month and remaining 15 days they are unemployed. The overall average income every month of both men and women is Rs. 4000. Out of this they spend Rs.175 as daily expenditure. The majority of their tribe spend more money on vegetable, liquor and tobacco consumption on a daily basis (Rs.30). They have tea without milk and spend Rs. 20 on tea and sugar. Snacks for their children, soap and washing powder consisted of Rs. 15 and 20. While surveying we noted that the majority of the respondents were not able to save because of their minimum income and many other expenses like liquor and tobacco. Most of their income is spent on daily expenditure and they are left with nothing to save. 89.38% of the tribal people do not have any savings amount. Out of 160 total samples, 10.62% of the population had saved a small amount of money.

They have other expenses as well like travelling to their workplace and other travels (Rs.20). Once a week they cooked mutton and chicken. They used Moha oil to cook food. The Moha tree is considered as 'Kalpavruksha' (tree of heaven) as it is very useful for its medicinal and economic uses in life.



Plate. 1.1 Waghya Deva

The social composition of both the Warli and Dhor-Koli tribes shows that the majority of the tribes' followed the Hindu religion. 1% of the tribal population visit church and are getting converted by missionaries into Christianity. Most of them were speaking the Marathi language and very few spoke the Warli language at their household level; there was no special language for the Dhor-Koli tribe. Marriage plays an important role in both tribes. All the important decisions were majorly taken by the married couple in the house. The oldest members were the head of the family irrespective of their gender. Marriage decisions were taken with the bride and groom's consent and arranged by their family members. The important festivals celebrated by both tribes were Koli bhaji, Shimga, Sedasad, Pitrapat and Goan Devi Utsav also known as Diwali and with a minimum of 20–25

with their community members, they celebrated their festival. They worshipped their deities occasionally and visited the temple, keeping fasts in the name of their god.

IV. Conclusion

“Nature is created by God and is omnipresent” is the principal belief of the Warlis and the Dhor-Kolis. They preserve their ancestral wisdom and ecological knowledge by following traditions taught and handed down from generation to generation. Both nature and the environment are interdependent. In their perspective, if nature is harmed, the environment will deteriorate and if nature decides, creatures can be destroyed in a few moments. Thus, Nature and God are one and the same, and both have tremendous power. They believe that animals and plants like human beings have a soul because they were created by God and it is the responsibility of human beings to protect and preserve the non-human species of the environment. They are of the opinion that it is morally forbidden to do things that are not in our religion. They have a firm conviction that “all the customs in our society are right, they are the symbol of our tribe and that it is wrong to imitate rules and regulations which are external to our tribe.” Thus, morality and righteousness according to the Warlis and the Dhor-Kolis is adhering to the ancestral norms and regulations.

The observances from field visits bring out key aspects. The tribes are more concerned about their subsequent generations' education, low transport installations, and further academic-related schools/colleges are located far away from their pada, resulting in a major deterrent to good education. In search of employment opportunities and good education, tribal families migrated from their pada to cities. The missionary activity is also noticed to convert families to Christianity, and still, on authorized documents, they show them as members of tribal communities. We also observed a few families call them Christan warli and others call them Hindu warli. Increasing urbanisation has brought remarkable changes in tribal people's lifestyles, including television sets, fridges etc.; yet women of the tribe's community need to walk miles to collect water from wells. The public health facility is located min 40-45km far away, this shows us low

health installation in tribal areas, giving an increasing number of health problems. Due to urbanisation their lifestyle, languages and consideration towards nature have changed. In earlier times, tribes used to use natural resources to celebrate their ceremonies and rituals but during our field visit we observed that they are influenced by urbanisation and have started using plastic glasses. Earlier, the tribal communities would make use of natural resources for different ceremonies and functions, but during our visits we noticed plastic glasses, thermal plates, and so on. Earlier, the tribal communities would make use of natural resources for different ceremonies and functions, but now they are influenced by urbanization and have started using plastic glass and paper. Today's generation prefers modern music like DJ in contrast to the Tarpa which is their time-honoured music during marriage rituals.

It was also observed that the area which we selected for our sample was about 150 km away from Mumbai and 60 km away from Nashik. Knowing the status of urbanization of Mumbai and Nashik, this area was expected to have some benefits of development in their socioeconomic progress. No doubt the penetration of progress happens but the degree of development was so poor that these habitats are living at least 50 years backwards. Rather the understanding and dependence on the nature of these tribes is minimized as they are dragged in the so-called 'economic progress'. The progress can be sustainable for these people if we incorporate their knowledge and try to have equilibrium with modernization techniques. We found there is a lack of actual implementation of most needed projects. Water resources development, soil conservation measures viz., bunding, tree platforms, specific programs for health and skill upliftment of men and women, better socialization area etc. are some of the programs suggested for the uplifting of these people here. The



Plate 2: Women carrying water for daily use, twice a day.

development will be sustainable only if these tribes are not de-rooted but they should be included according to their potential and capacity.

The present article is based on the final report of two tribal communities of Thane and Palghar districts submitted to ICSSR, New Delhi.



Plate 3: A tribal woman pressing Moha seeds.



Plate 4: Warli Art evolves itself to keep the community informed about COVID-19



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