

FAIRS AS PLACES OF SOCIAL INTERACTION A STUDY OF NIRA VALLEY, MAHRASHTRA

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Abstract : The paper classifies and discusses the importance and the usefulness of fairs in rural India. Taking the case study of Nira valley in western Maharashtra (India) it is demonstrated that fair centres despite their being at the lowest rung of settlement hierarchy perform some very important functions like social interaction and retail trade.

Fair centres play an important role in the social organization, and act as the places of community gathering. In spite of their role as trade centres, these places also act as social centres, where people from surrounding villages come together and discuss various social family problems. These are the places where important social decisions take place. Sometimes family disputes and marriages are also settled in such social gatherings.

The region under study lies between 17° 35' and 18° 25' north latitudes and 70° 25' and 75° 30' east longitudes. It is a part of southern Maharashtra and forms the Nira Valley. The course of the river covers eight talukas of Pune, Satara and Solapur districts. It includes Indapur, Baramati, Purandhar, Bhore, Velhe talukas of Pune district, Khandala and Phaltan Talukas of Satara district and Malshiras taluka of Solapur district. It covers an area of 8571.6 sq. kms., which accounts for only 2.1 percent area of the Maharashtra State. According to 1981 census the area has the total population of 14,10,124 persons and the average density 163 persons per sq. km. (Fig.1)

Religious fairs which are organised by social institutions and attended by various social communities from different areas are important places which bring together a social class which worships a particular deity and attend a social gathering at the time of fairs. Such fairs play an important role in the rural life of the people and it is interesting to note that the particular areas have a dominance of particular type of deity, which is worshipped by majority of the people.

Most of the fairs in the rural areas are organized during the dry period particularly from December to May. More fairs are organized in April and May, when people are free from their agricultural activities.

In the study area there are 185 fairs organized in a whole year. The frequency distribution of fairs in different months of the year (Fig. 2) clearly indicates that out of total 185 fairs, 151 fairs are organized in the first five months of the year. Nearly 54 percent of the total fairs are organized in the month of April.

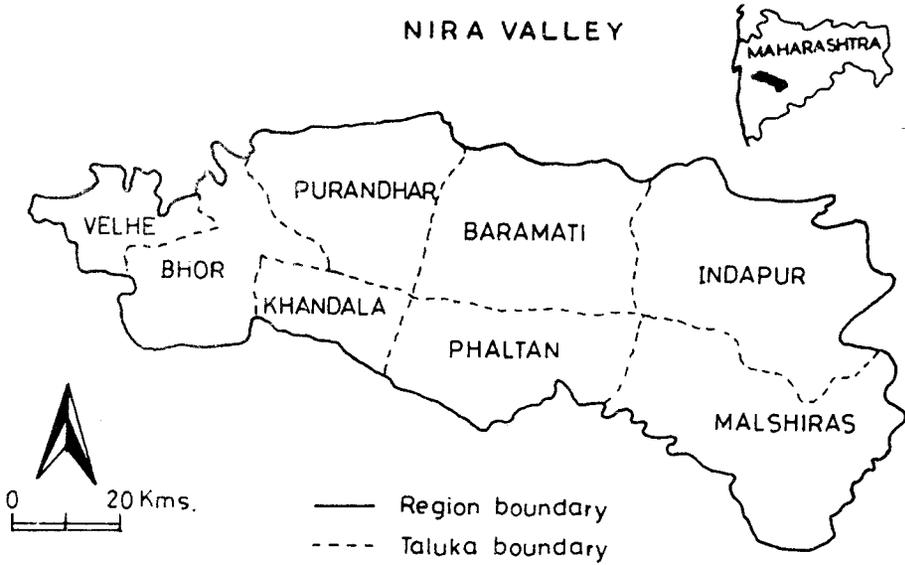


Fig. 1 :

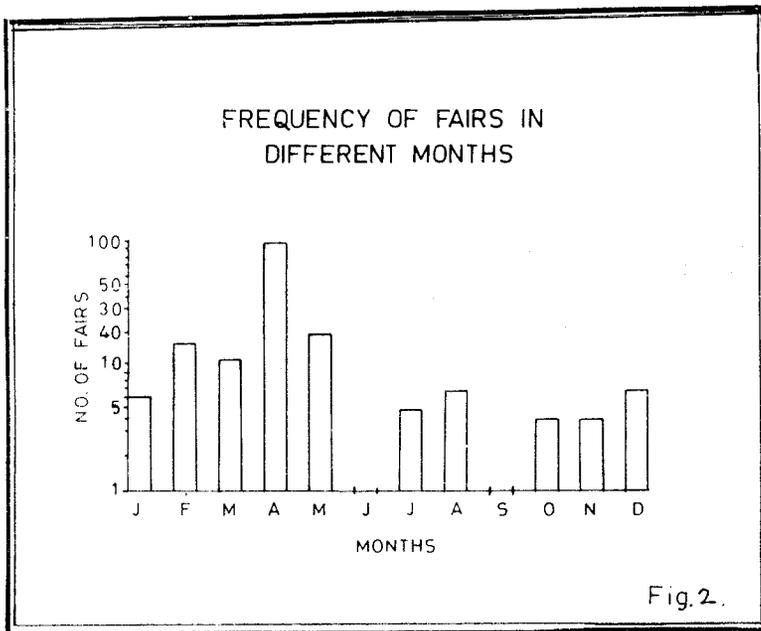


Fig. 2.

Fig. 2 :

CLASSIFICATION OF FAIRS :

The fairs in the study area are classified according to the types of deity worshipped by people in the area. It is observed that in the study area nearly 35.5 percent fairs are attached to the idol of Lord Shiva and his different images. It is observed that the Lord Shiva is worshipped under three different names as

Bhairav, Mahadeo and Khandoba.

Bhairav fair which is dominantly found in Bhor, Phaltan and Khandala taluka celebrated in the summer season, when most of the village roads are dry and usable. The people are free from their agricultural activities. Mahadev fairs are dominantly found in Indapur and Malshiras talukas. Khandoba fairs are

Table I :

Talukawise Distribution of Fairs

Taluka	Bhairav	Mahadeo	Khandoba	Maruti	Laxmi	Local	Total Deities	Percentage
Indapur	4	3	-	3	2	5	17	9.2
Baramati	5	-	-	2	3	4	14	7.6
Purandhar	6	-	1	--	1	12	20	11.0
Bhor	13	-	1	1	4	6	25	13.5
Velhe	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	1.0
Khandala	11	-	-	4	11	10	36	19.4
Phaltan	9	-	-	9	4	15	37	19.9
Malshiras	2	3	2	4	5	18	34	18.4
Total	50	6	4	23	31	71	185	100.0
% to total	27.0	3.4	2.1	12.4	16.7	38.4	100.0	-

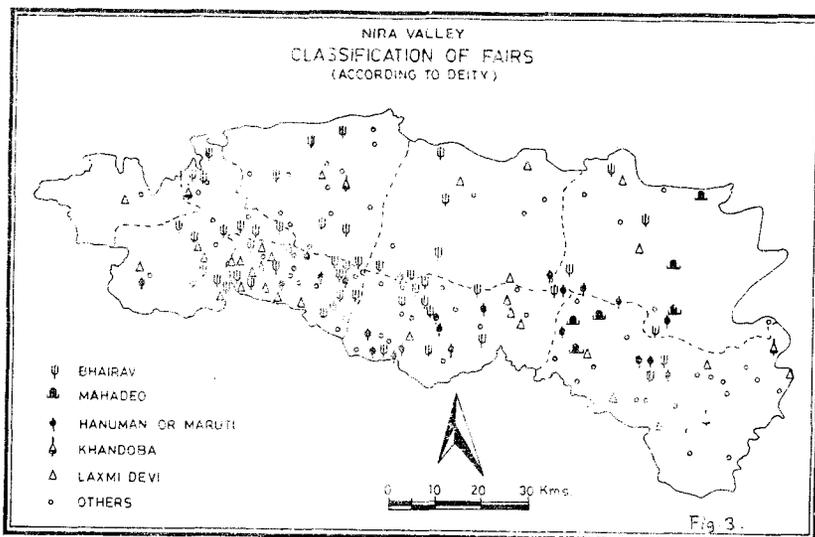


Fig. 3 :

celebrated in Malshiras, Bhore and Purandhar talukas.

Hanuman or Maruti is an important deity worshipped in almost all the areas. There are 23 Hanuman fairs in the area. More number of Hanuman fairs are observed in Phaltan taluka.

The goddess Laxmi is worshipped dominantly in Khandala, Malshiras, Bhore and Phaltan talukas. There are 31 Mahalaxmi fairs in the area of which 11 fairs are celebrated in Khandala taluka (Table I and fig. No. 3).

HIERARCHY OF FAIRS

The hierarchical class system is a very important part of the spatial model of central places. The fairs being the seasonal central places, which provide important goods and services to the people of the surrounding area, an attempt has been made here to find out the hierarchic importance of fair centres in the study area. Here one must keep in mind that the importance

of fairs is not only based on the provision of goods and services but it is mainly related to the importance of deities, which attract the masses, goods and services.

METHODOLOGY :

In order to find out the hierarchic importance of fair centres, we have tried to collect the fair tax of all the fair centres. In spite of our efforts it was not possible to collect the fair tax for all the centres, hence we have selected another criteria of number of people visiting fairs to establish their hierarchic importance.

After collecting the data of the number of people visiting fairs, we have ranked all the fair centres of the study area and classified them into four orders of hierarchy (Table - II).

LEVEL OF HIERARCHY

All fair centres in the study area are classified into four orders of hierarchy based on number of people visiting the fairs (fig. 4).

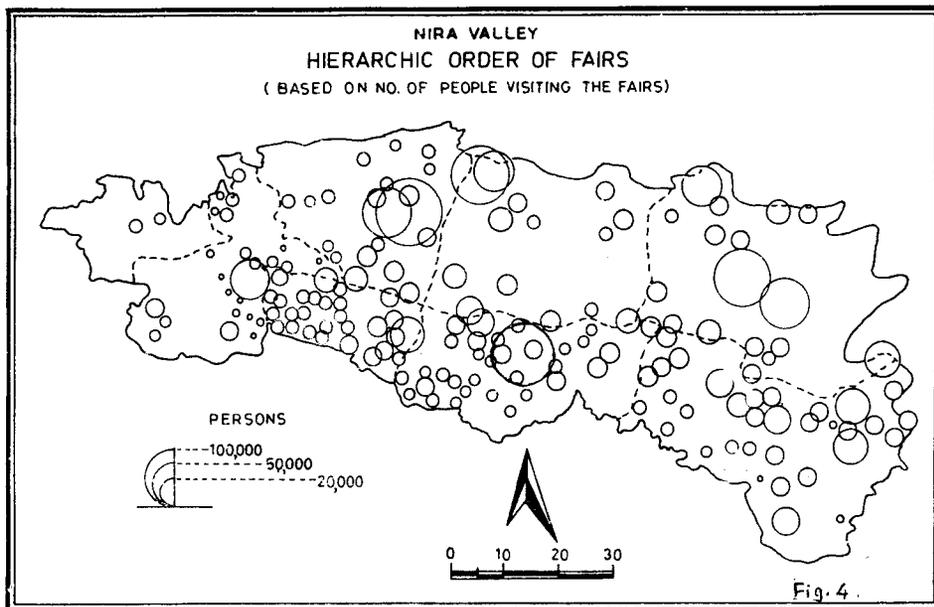


Fig. 4 :

Table - II
Hierarchic order and number of fair centres.

Hierarchic order	No. of fair centres
1 First order	1
2 Second order	5
3 Third order	14
4 Fourth order	165

In the hierarchical class system of fair centres, Jejuri is only the first order fair centre. The second order includes Phaltan, Moregaon, Shelgaon, Saswad, Nimgaon Ketaki fair centres of the area. The third order includes 14 fairs centres namely Supe, Bhor, Nimbut, Bhigawan, Narsingpur, Murum, Velapur, Malshiras, Lonand, Mahalung, Piliv, Pondshiras Purandavade and Dharpuri. Remaining 165 fair centres are classified as the fourth order fair centres.

The first order fair centre Jejuri is an important religious centre of the area. Nearly 1.25 lakh people visit the fair of 'Khandoba' at Jejuri. The range of this fair centre lies beyond the study area. The people from the entire western Maharashtra visit this fair.

The social analysis of the Jejuri fair reveals the fact that the fair is dominantly visited by 'Mang' and Dhangar' class of the society. It is a place of social gathering for these two communities. It is observed that these two communities visit the fair from distant parts like Kolhapur, Solapur, Dhule, Ahmednagar districts.

The second order fair centres attract population between 40,000 to 1,00,000. The 'Shriram' fair of Phaltan held in the month of April is visited by a population of nearly 1 lakh people. Most of the people from the study area and nearby villages visit this fair. The fair is visited by all castes and communities of Hindus.

Moregaon the third important religious place is included in the important 'Ashtavinayak' idols of Lord 'Ganapati'. The place is visited by the people from all the parts of Maharashtra and also by the Maharashtrians living outside the Maharashtra throughout the year. Nearly 1,00,000 people visit the place. The visitors include all social classes from the rural and urban societies.

The village Shelgaon holds a fair of 'Muktabai'. Muktabai, a sister of Dnyaneshwar and 'Guru' of Changdev was a renowned poetess of Maharashtra. The fair is organized in the month of October or November and visited by nearly 80,000 people.

The fifth important fair centre Saswad holds a fair of 'Sopankaka' in the month of April and attended by nearly 55,000 people of the study area. The fair is attended by all classes of Hindu society of the study area. A village Nimgaon Ketaki holds a fair of 'Ketakeshwar' in the month of April. The fair is visited by nearly 50,000 people, mostly from Indapur, Baramati and Malshiras talukas. The fair committee organized wrestling bouts which are attended by wrestlers from entire western Maharashtra. It is social gathering of the wrestlers of rural areas of the study region.

The fair centres included in the third order are visited by a population ranging between 20,000 and 40,000 persons, Their area of influence ranges between 30 to 50 kms.

The fourth order fair centres include most of the local fairs. Such fairs are visited by 10,000 to 15,000 people and some of them by less than 5,000 people. Some of these fairs are very small. They attract only the population of surrounding villages, such fairs are called 'Panchakroshi' fairs. But these fairs are more

important because they act as the meeting ground of various communities.

Some of the small fairs are selective social fairs, they are visited by a particular social class. For example the fair organized at village Rui in the month of November is specifically visited by 'Dhanagar' community of the western Maharashtra. The fair of 'Biroba' is visited by most of the Dhangar population.

CONCLUSION :

Local deities and saints are worshipped by the local people of the villages. Such fairs are attended by the village people and the people of 'Panchkroshi'. Their hierarchic importance is lowest but they play very important role in the social interaction at the lowest order of hierarchy. Such local fairs include Urus, Gramdevata fairs and celebrations of birth and death anniversaries of local saints.

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