

Tribal Regions of Thane District in Western Maharashtra: An Analysis

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Abstract: *An attempt has been made here to identify the core areas of major tribes in Thane district, bordering the Mumbai metropolitan region. Tribe combination regions have been delineated to throw light on the evolution of various tribes in the area.*

Introduction

India has the largest tribal population in the world after Africa. The Scheduled tribes constitute 9 percent of Maharashtra's total population according to the 1991 Census. Geographically, tribals in the State are unevenly spread over 47 tehsils in 14 districts. In 1950, a notification issued by the government of India, declared some specified areas as tribal areas in the state. The tribal sub-plan areas demarcated for planning and development purpose were coterminous with these notified areas (Jain, 1998). The decadal growth rate of tribal population in the state until 1971, was in keeping with the general growth trends in the state. In the subsequent two decades (1981 and 1991) a phenomenal rise in tribal population, which could be categorized as abnormal increase was observed. For example, the increase in the tribal population during 1971-81, was a hundred percent. Probing further to find reasons for this abnormal growth, it was noticed that a process of pseudo tribalization was going on. Communities with similar caste names took the opportunity to get themselves recorded in the tribal category. During the last

two decades, a large number of schemes have been implemented by the government and non-government voluntary organizations for the welfare of tribal communities (Singh 1983). To take advantage of these schemes the non tribals enrolled themselves as tribals in the census record. This is not a very difficult task, because the census enumerators were not supposed to question the respondents about their answers. Their job was merely to record their replies. Information recorded in the census returns incidentally cannot be produced as evidence in the court of law, nor can it be challenged. Therefore, many non-tribals, without hesitation declared themselves as Scheduled tribes (Sharma, 1978).

Turning our attention to the study area, Thane district has been a traditional tribal habitat, long before largescale industrial and urban development made inroads into the Greater Mumbai Metropolitan region. With the disappearance of the forest cover in Thane district and with ever widening radius of the urban sprawl, major changes were taking place in the tribals' way of life and pattern of distribution.

Objective

Following issues are raised:

- 1) Why certain tribal groups are located in distinct geographical niches?
- 2) Are the various tribes in the areas derived from a single major tribe, for example the Bhil tribe in this case?

Answers to these questions, it is believed may lead to a better appreciation of the contemporary pattern of tribal population in the study area.

Hypothesis

There is no particular hypothesis the study proposes to prove or reject, but an attempt has been made to see how far the distribution of various tribes in the area fits with Karve's

theory of 'fission'-a process according to Karve, responsible for the evolution of various tribes, seen in the area today. Karve opines that the various subsistence strategies the tribes adopt in different eco-niches ultimately lead to the formation of a number of splinter groups. In other words, the large number of tribes one comes across in the area have resulted from the process of fission as opposed to fusion. This phenomenon is not uncommon among primitive tribes living in isolation over extended periods of time. Occupational structures thus forged in virtually closed environments are reflected in the formation of different communities, though in effect they might be just group identity divisions among them (Karve, 1968).

Against this background, a broad pattern of the tribal population in India and Maharashtra has been outlined before analyzing the salient features of the major tribes in the study region.

Distribution of Tribal Population : India and Maharashtra

At the macro-level, the distribution of tribal population in India, clearly shows the dominance of Central India as the tribal heartland. This area is home to over fifty-five percent of the country's tribals, its center lies in *Dandakaranyana*, a buffer zone between two major civilizations- the Aryans in the North and the Dravidians in the South. The other main area of tribal concentration lies in a contiguous belt in western India, stretching right from the Aravallis in Rajasthan, through the Dangs in Gujarat, down the spine of the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. One fifth of the total tribal population of India is concentrated in this region. Another twenty- five percent of the tribal population resides at the foothills of the eastern and western Himalayas and a sprinkling of tribes are scattered in the Eastern Ghats.

Without exception, all tribal areas are characterized by niggardly resources, being difficult of access, they remain outside the main stream of development.

Looking at the state-wise distribution, Maharashtra has nearly ten percent of India's tribals, this is slightly more than the average for the country (8.01). As in case of most tribal populations, the spatial distribution of tribals in Maharashtra shows a highly skewed pattern. Two major areas of concentration are the strongholds of tribals in the state. The first lies in western Maharashtra in the Sahyadri hills- this is the domain of the Bhil tribe, the major tribal group in Western India. The second major concentration of tribals in the state is in the northeast corner of Maharashtra, where the Gonds constitute the single largest tribal group. According to the 1991 census, Maharashtra has 75 lakh tribals, spread over 0.5 lakh sq.km. of area.

Table 1: Growth of Tribal Population in Maharashtra 1961 to 1991.

Years	Population (in lakhs)		Percentage of Tribals
	Total	Tribal	
1961	395.54	23.97	5.83
1971	504.12	29.54	5.86
1981	627.84	53.72	9.19
1991	789.37	73.18	9.27

Source : Census of India 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991.

For the purpose of this study attention is focused mainly on the tribes of Thane district, which forms a small portion of the larger tribal zone in the Western Ghats. A zone of high concentration of tribal population in the northwest parts of Thane district is found in the hilly region between 300 to 350 meters elevation. Tribal areas generally coincide with the headwaters of tributary streams, they lie in regions of highly dissected topography, in areas not suitable for regular cultivation.

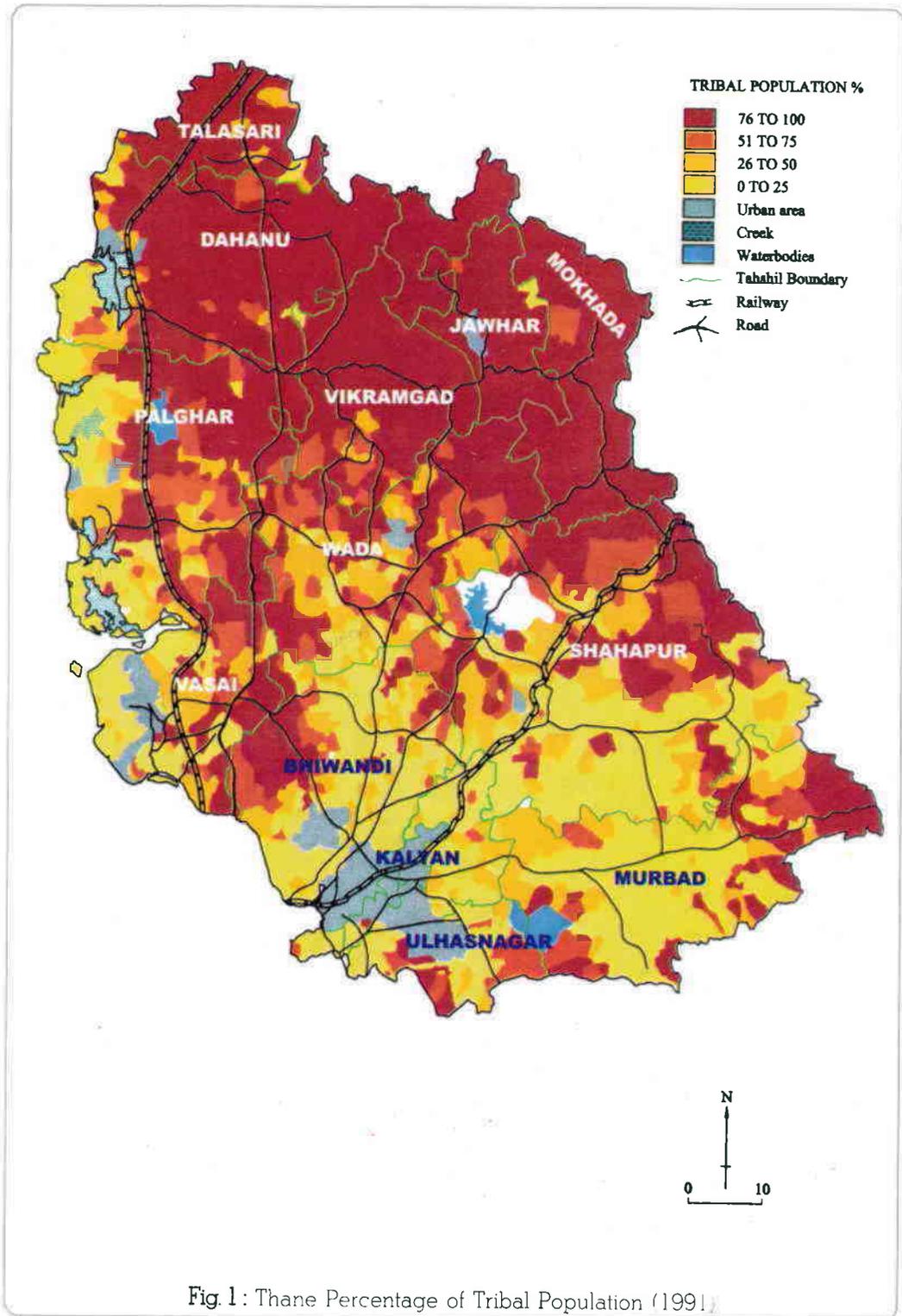


Fig. 1: Thane Percentage of Tribal Population (1991)

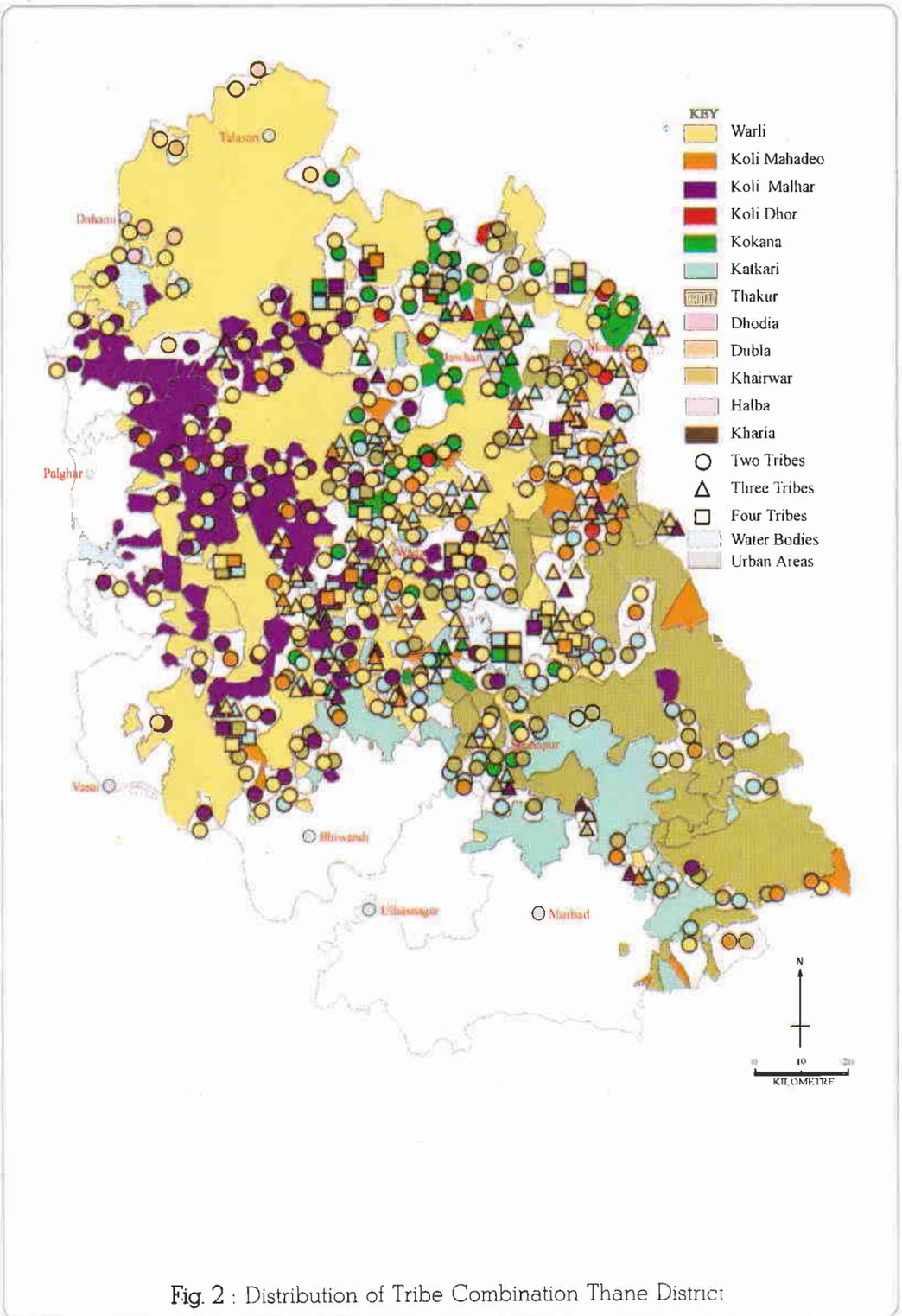


Fig. 2 : Distribution of Tribe Combination Thane District

Table 2 : Distribution of Major Tribes in Maharashtra-(1971,1981 and 1991)

Sr. No.	Tribes	Population %					
		1971	(%)	1981	(%)	1991	(%)
1	Bhil (i)	3,75,022	(15.64)	6,78,750	(22.97)	9,93,074	(17.2)
2	Bhil(ii)	48,089	(2.00)	53,649	(1.82)	55,880	(0.97)
3	Bhil (iii)	1,02,321	(4.27)	1,28,831	(4.36)	1,10,828	(1.92)
4	Katkari	1,40,672	(5.87)	1,46,785	(4.97)	1,74,602	(3.02)
5	Kokana	2,12,836	(8.88)	2,64,009	(8.94)	3,52,932	(6.11)
6	Koli (i)	15,461	(0.64)	43,528	(1.47)	77,435	(1.34)
7	Koli (ii)	2,74,244	(11.44)	3,39,855	(11.5)	7,87,448	(13.64)
8	Koli(iii)	89,047	(3.71)	99,618	(3.37)	1,77,367	(3.07)
9	Varali	2,43,980	(10.18)	2,93,931	(9.95)	3,61,271	(6.26)
10	Other tribes	8,95,487	(37.36)	9,05,293	(30.64)	26,81,201	(46.45)
11	Total tribes	23,97,159	(100)	29,54,249	(100)	57,72,038	(100)

Source : Census of India 1961,1971,1981 and 1991.

Earlier the forests formed the heart of the tribal eco-system, providing sustenance to a large section of the tribals, but now they have been greatly depleted. The tribals have all but disappeared along with the forests in the areas bordering the Mumbai metropolitan region, in the southern parts of the district, and along the western railway tract in Thane. The impact of transport routes and other developments in the Greater Mumbai region are responsible for this decline, especially in the Kalyan-Bhiwandi, Ulhasnagar areas and along the Mumbai-Agra highway. The impact of the 'urbs prima' can be gauged in the sharp decline of tribal population in the vicinity of Mumbai.

Distribution of tribal population in Thane district

Thane district has a total of 1679 villages. By 1991, only half the villages had over fifty percent tribals, while one-third of the villages had between 0-25 percent tribal population. In the rural-urban fringe, the tribals are

conspicuous by their absence. Large scale penetration of non-tribal population has virtually driven the tribals away. Between 1981-1991 the proportion of tribal population in the district has increased from 7.29 percent to 9.51 percent. According to 1991 Census, over 18 percent of the total tribal population of the state is concentrated in Thane district.

The Major Tribes of Thane District

Among the various tribal groups, *Warli* is the major tribe in the district. The population of *Warli* is highly concentrated in the northern and north central part of Thane district in the hilly Western Ghats region. The *Warli* work as wage labour on plantations, in brick kilns or on construction sites. *Warlis* are also engaged in harvesting grass from fallow lands, since a lucrative market for hay exists in the dairy industry around Mumbai. Those who practice agriculture grow hill millets on sloping lands under shifting cultivation. The other major tribe, which is also one of the most primitive in these

areas, is the *Katkari*. They are supposed to have moved down from Surat district in Gujrat, in search of Khair trees, (*acacia catacheu*), used for making *katha*, required for preparing betelnut or *paan*. The *Katkari* are the most mobile among the tribes because they are landless. A hundred years ago they use to fell trees for making charcoal, which was their main occupation. Even today they prefer to live on the edge of the forest, near stream banks where they still practice hunting, fishing and collection of minor forest produce. Looking at their spatial pattern of distribution, most *Katkari* are concentrated on the rural-urban fringe of the Mumbai Metropolitan region where they work as coolies, wage earners, brick layers, stone cutters and in the extraction of sand from river-beds. The other major group the *Thakars* have two sub-groups namely the *Mahadev Kolis* and *Malhar Kolis*, both these groups occupy the eastern hilly margins of the district in the Western Ghat region. They consider themselves of superior blood, claiming descent from the Rajputs—a Kshatriya caste. Most *Thakars* have taken to cultivation. They also work as casual labour in agriculture. Koli, the other important tribe has the maximum number of sub-tribes. Their concentration is mainly along the western margins of the district, diametrically opposite to where the *Thakars* are located. *Kolis* are mainly cultivators. The educated among them work in the public sector or in government jobs in the lower cadre. The Thane District gazetteer of 1881, mentions that the *Malhar Koli*, a sub-tribe of the *Koli* were traditionally the guards at many forts in the Sahyadri, during Shivaji's time. Today, many *Koli* have taken to rice cultivation, besides gathering of forest produce. The *Kokna*, the fourth most important tribe in Thane, is supposed to have migrated up from south Konkan, namely the Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri districts. They speak dialects of *Konkani* and are more numerous in the coastal areas. They have taken to agriculture in a big way, both as cultivators

and agricultural labourers. They are highly localized in the plain areas in the central part of the district.

From the foregoing it is seen that the tribes inhabiting Thane district have tribe names, which are derived, either from their occupation or from the locations they occupy. For example, *Warli* in Marathi literally means those living above or on the top. These tribes live in the fastness of the jungle in the upper reaches of the plateaus in the Western Ghats. The *Konkna* in contrast are tribals hailing from the Konkan region. The *Katkari* got their name from their occupation of distilling *Katha*. Here the suffix, *kari* in Marathi means 'one who makes'. The makers of *katha* are the *Katkari*. *Kolis* are generally connected with fishing which was their main occupation in the past. Earlier those who settled in the villages were engaged in providing water to the village folks. Even today they are generally found near the stream banks close to water bodies where fishing still remains their favourite sport. A number of *Kolis* are engaged on fishing boats, trawlers and on ships for loading and unloading cargo.

Tribe Regions of Thane

To identify the tribe regions in Thane district, the population of each tribe was plotted village-wise. Very interesting results were seen in their spatial distribution pattern. Four exclusive domains, coinciding with the four major tribes in the area were isolated. Each tribal realm had a distinct core area and an area of dispersion. The areas of dispersion show a high degree of association with the numeric strength of the tribe. In other words it was found that the larger the population of the tribe, the further was its areal spread from the core. After examining the major concentration of dominant tribes in the area, Karve's view on evolution of different tribal groups appeared more logical. On the basis of empirical observation also, it did not appear as if distinct racial traits were

basis of empirical observation also, it did not appear as if distinct racial traits were differentiating the various tribal groups from each other, instead their distinct identities were associated largely with their occupational affiliations, which could be at the root of this diversity. This lends credence to the popular view that different tribes seen in the region today may have arisen out of cultural differences between the tribal groups, separated over a long span of time, within distinct geographical areas, where communication links in the past were very poor.

Tribe Combination Regions

To derive a more meaningful picture of the pattern of tribal distribution in the area, the tribe-wise population at village level was subject to Doi's method (commonly used in isolating crop combination regions) to isolate tribe combination regions. On the basis of this method, the domains of major tribes were identified and mapped. Distinct core areas emerged, interspersed with areas where maximum mixing of tribes had taken place. This zone of tribal diversity was located in the central parts of Thane district close to the main lines of communication. Greater accessibility led to greater displacement and mobility, which explains the existing multi-tribe zone along the inner periphery. The general pattern derived from the tribe combination regions shows four clearly defined regions. These coincide with mono-tribe regions where the four major tribes over shadow the rest. At the margin lies the multi-tribe zone, where a definite pattern is visible amidst the apparent chaos. Here as one moves from the core area towards the periphery, the tribe combinations progressively increase from two to three

tribe regions and finally merging imperceptibly into the four-tribe zone.

Conclusion

Differences observed in the major tribal groups are occupational, arising out of different resource utilization practices in response to different environments. On the basis of empirical observation it may be stated with some amount of confidence that the major tribal groups in the area present a picture of being socially cohesive units, associated with distinct territorial bounds and as members of this group, they also regard with themselves as politically autonomous. Their current pattern of distribution reflects changes brought about by modifications in their natural surroundings mainly due to depletion in the forest cover. The penetration by non-tribals and modern communications has altered the traditional spatial pattern of the tribal groups in the district. Some tribals have been pushed into the interior areas with penetration of non-tribals, most of them have been marginalized or dispossessed of their lands and forced into wage earning or other environmentally destructive activities. The tribe combination regions have brought out the dynamics of the spatial pattern of major tribes in Thane district, which can be readily explained.

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