

Traders At Weekly Market (A Case study of Bhor)

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Abstract

Weekly markets or periodic markets are important for buying and selling of agricultural produce for the rural folk. Besides performing the marketing function for the dispersed population in the countryside, they also provide some petty employment to the vast army of unemployed rural poor while allowing the small farmer with little marketable surplus to sell his produce, for ready cash. An in-depth study of the traders' characteristics and their spatial mobility patterns has been undertaken with a view to study the changing trends of behavior.

Introduction

In India, where agriculture is the mainstay of at least 65% of the population, Periodic Markets are an important institution of retail trading. Even today there are as many as 26,250 rural markets serving nearly 600 million people, residing in the countryside. Therefore, markets can hardly be-written off as mere vestiges of past patterns of trading. Instead, there is a growing recognition of their importance as one of the principal tertiary outlets in the context of developing countries.

Since the present enquiry is meant to be a micro-level analysis of the changing trends of traders' characteristics and their spatial mobility patterns, an in depth study of the market at Bhor was carried out.

Bhor, a tehsil headquarter of the same name in Pune District is the focal point for 185 villages in the taluka. It acts as a central place for its surrounding region, while catering to the peripheral functions of the smaller market centers. Another unique feature about Bhor is its insular geographical location in the midst of hilly Western Ghats, a little distance away from Pune; its interior location has largely been instrumental in keeping the traditional weekly market system intact. Otherwise, one would expect that prox-

imity to Pune would have led to a general decline in the weekly marketing practice.

The Weekly Market: Bhor

The Weekly Market at Bhor meets every Tuesday and seems to be an old and enduring feature of the landscape. The commodities traded are vegetables, ready-made garments, *sarees*, *dhotis*, clay pots, glassware, footwear, cheap trinkets, dry fish, betel leaves, nuts, tobacco and coarse woolen blankets. There are about 414 stalls and their arrangement resembles a 'Y' shaped figure.

The volume of trade at the weekly market at Bhor ebbs and flows with a rhythm, which is largely dictated by the major agricultural season. In case of Bhor it is the winter season i.e., December, January and February when the *khari* crop, mainly harvested rice comes in. Also the festival of Diwali, during this period and other religious and social activities followed by the marriage season, greatly affect the pattern and volume of sales at the weekly market. (Karve and Acharya, 1970)

The figures of municipal tax collected also support the above fact that maximum sales occur during winter i.e. December, January and February. Another peak in sales at Bhor occurs

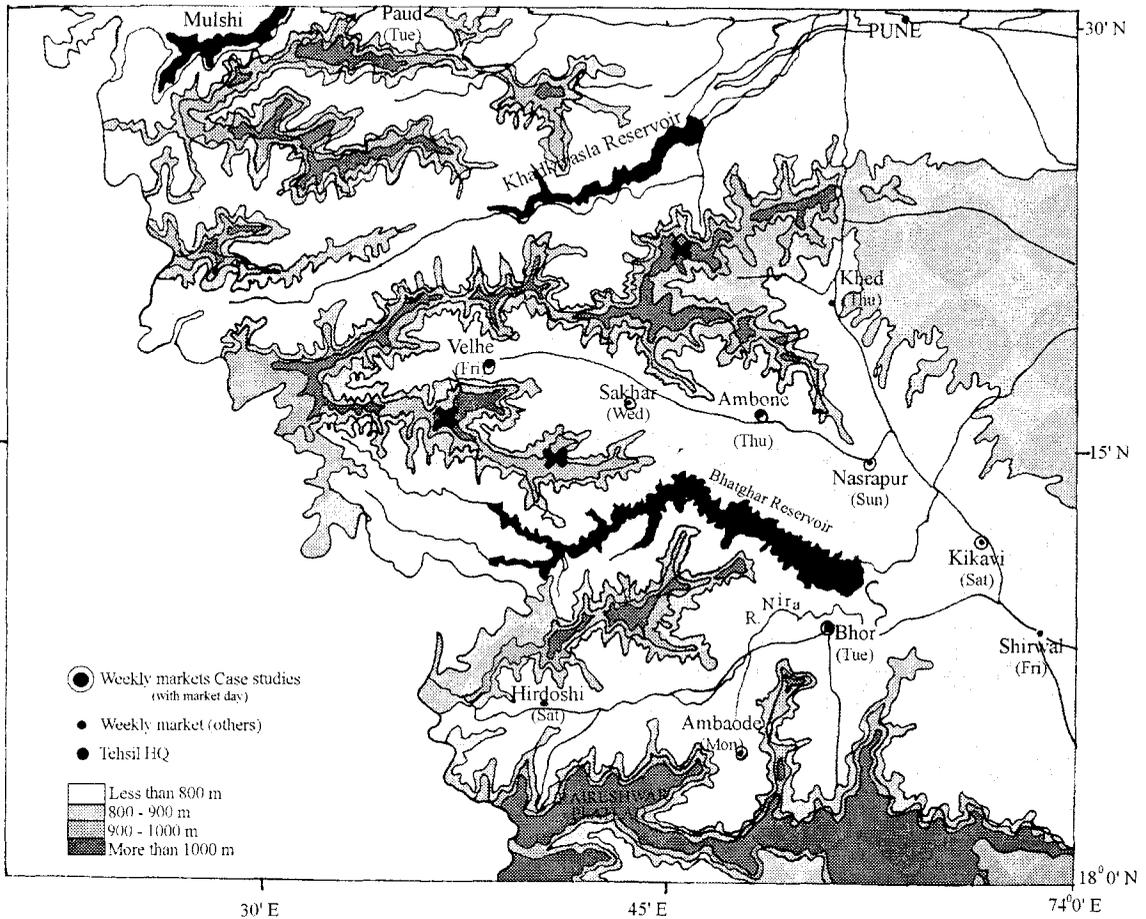


Fig. 1: Location of market places

somewhere around the last fortnight of May, when people stock onions and potatoes just before the onset of rains as communications in the area get disrupted and market operations are suspended.

Trader Profile at Bhore

Based on the inventory made from field survey, of traders who attend the weekly markets, it is observed that 90% of all traders are males, while the remaining 10% are women sellers. Caste-wise composition of traders reveals that 65% of traders are farmers who belong either to the local agricultural community i.e., the Marathas or allied sub-castes. The *Baniya*, belonging to the traditional trader caste constitute 15% and deal

in a much wider range of commodities. In addition to provisions, grocery, spices and utensils, they also sell manufactured goods and cheap clothing. Nearly 20% of the low caste traders, including those belonging to the artisan castes, sell traditional wares. For example, the potter deals in clay pots, while the cobbler sells leather and plastic footwear. The 'Mangs' belonging to the lowest among the schedule castes of Maharashtra still carry on their traditional trade of making ropes and brooms and selling them at the weekly market at Bhore. Muslim traders on the other hand constitute 15% of the traders and trade in betel nuts, betel leaves and tobacco, besides bakery products, textiles and handcrafted playthings for children. The level of education

among the traders is in general very low. Nearly 60% are school dropouts. Another 20% are illiterate, while 50% have barely completed five years of schooling. Age-wise composition of the traders reveals that 75% of the traders belong to the age group between 35 to 50 years.

The occupational mobility among traders is generally low. 75% of the traders are still engaged in their traditional occupations. 50% of the traders who were interviewed reported they were carrying on their ancestral business. In the absence of either education or skills, formal employment in government service or any other white-collared jobs are not forthcoming. The weekly market therefore provides an avenue for self-employment, without much need for capital or other infrastructure. It has thus become the hunting ground for the unemployed rural poor, particularly those with no financial backing to start their enterprise.

Regarding the ownership of productive assets, 45% of the professional traders owned a permanent shop in their home village. Most of the peasant class of sellers combined farming with occasional selling at weekly markets, using it as an outlet for their own small surplus produce. Only 25% of the farmers attending the weekly markets owned agricultural land ranging from half to about 5 acres.

Traders' Origin

Sellers belonging to about 62 villages in the hinterland attend the Bhor weekly market. There is a strong association between type of commodity sold and the caste and other socio-cultural affiliations of the sellers. One out of every third trader belongs to Bhor and together with those coming from nearby Naigaon village they account for 40% of the total sellers. Traders hailing from the same village as a rule, deal in similar types of commodities. For example, out of 59 traders originating from Naigaon, 46 sold garlic and turmeric. Traders from village Shirval generally specialize in cereals, pulses, cloth and spices, while those from village Nasrapur dealt

mainly in rice and fresh vegetables. Sellers of used, second hand clothes and incense sticks come all the way from Pune, while those from Saswad town sell fairly diversified merchandise like provisions, cereals, spices, and other consumables. The tiny villages located on the outskirts of Bhor seem to bring in most of the fresh vegetables and rice.

Sellers from larger places like Pune, Lonand, Shirval and Saswad supply mainly durable consumer goods like ready-made clothes, utensils, hardware, footwear, incense sticks and agarbattis. These are full time professional traders who attend several other markets and do much of their shopping either in Pune or in Mumbai. Except for the slack season during the rains, when the demand is low and the market is hardly operative, most traders follow a regular market circuit, which on an average includes at least three weekly markets per week. The local sellers from Bhor deal in a wide assortment of goods that are available locally, unlike traders from outside who deal in specific commodities.

As already mentioned in the foregoing, leaving aside the small farmer who sells his own produce, the regular traders generally obtain in bulk, commodities from the larger urban markets for re-sale. These sellers attend the markets where there are greater sales and a higher profit margin. Their main overhead is the cost of transport and therefore turnover is a critical factor. Turnover thus seems to be the critical factor and market attendance largely depends on this. As far as the peasant seller is concerned, he attends mainly those markets, which are in the vicinity, since he only attends the market when he is in need of some petty cash or some daily necessities. His attendance pattern shows a strong bias towards visiting the market closest to his home. Convenience takes precedence over all other considerations, because if for some reason, he is unable to attend a particular market, he simply attends another market nearby which is held thereafter. (Mukerji, 1957).

As far as the distance travelled by traders attending the Bhor weekly market was concerned, no trader traveled more than 65 kms. which is less than two hours travel time. Traders who deal with perishables are drawn from within one hour's isochrone and trade in a wider assortment of commodities, particularly, non-perishables and manufactured consumer items.

As regards capital outlay, 50 % of the traders had invested less than Rs. 5000/-. About 155 sellers invested their own money, while 20% had borrowed capital from private sources, including moneylenders.

In the last 3–4 decades, improvement in communications and greater mobility in terms of lesser travel time has made the trader a commuter to the weekly market. He prefers to return home each night even though he may attend another market nearby the next day. A full day's journey by bullock cart is now barely a two hours ride by bus. Earlier, all traders used to travel by bullock cart, carrying their goods to the markets in the cart visiting a number of markets before returning home. But today, except for a few farmers who live within a radius of 4 – 5 kms from Bhor, all sellers depend on private transport like trucks, matadors or even ST bus to travel and to carry their goods to the market.

The most pronounced difference visible today is that earlier the traders were traveling sales persons. It was more or less mandatory for them to make overnight halts at the various markets they visited, as it was impossible to return the same day. But today as no market lies beyond two hours travel, all traders interviewed mentioned that no overnight halt was necessary. It entailed extra expenditure for food and lodging while serving no purpose, as most places did not provide a proper or safe storage place for their goods.

The Future of Weekly Markets

Though one cannot pinpoint what lies ahead, for the present at least one can say that the

immediate future of weekly markets is not in jeopardy. They are, at the moment, firmly embedded in the fabric of rural society, and they would continue to function until sizeable volume of turnover is generated for them to be displaced by permanent shops. They would therefore continue to function as primary links, connecting the small farmer with the national marketing system, at least for some time to come. (Singh 1983).

Another reason why periodic markets would not cease to operate is because the small producer has only a small uneconomical quantity of produce to dispose off. Also, he has innumerable other constraints which operate against him. First and foremost, being the small scale of his operations. Secondly, organizing transport for oneself alone, in the face of rising transport costs to larger markets is in itself not economically feasible. Economy of scale, therefore, is a major constraint.

In conclusion, one can visualize a symbiotic or synergetic relationship between the permanent shopkeepers and periodic traders to continue without any significant change for some time to come.

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