



Caste and Communities of the Konkan Coastal Region : A study of the social structure in Medieval Period

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Abstract: *The present article attempts to make some contribution to the study of socio-economic condition on the western coastal part of India especially the Konkan coast in the medieval period. The economic condition of any period in Indian history cannot be examined without an understanding of the social life. I have tried to analyse the relationship between the social and economic life. I have examined caste and its phenomena as a basic form of social structure, which characterizes Konkan society and their livelihood. The attempt has been made to point out the role of caste and communities in the social and economic sphere.*

Key words: *Caste, Communities, Subcaste, Occupation, Land tenures, Konkan*

Introduction: The Konkan is coastal lowland adjoining the Arabian Sea in the north central parts of the west coast of India. Grant Duff pointed out that the Konkan extended along the coast from the Tapti to Sadashivgad and inland as far as the open plains of the Dakkan and he thus included in it parts of both Gujarat and Kanara and of the country above the Ghats. This latter he called Konkan Ghat Matha as opposed to tal-Konkan or the lowlands and he inferred that the Muslims were the first who set the name to the low country. Ferishta also said of the Konkan under the name of Tal-Ghat and Khafi Khan called it Tal-Konkan.¹

The period covered in this study is, chosen in the light of a number of factors. Some of the factors were available in abundance in these areas and how and which are the communities concentrated their attention through mainly socially and economically on the Konkan Coast. In each period social system developed economic resources and professions suitable for the continuity of the social system. Caste played a crucial role in India since ancient times; it can be seen in the writing of Megasthenese. A systematic attempt was made by Denzil Ibbetson and J. C. Nesfield's study that traces the genesis of caste and their development as an institution. They point out that the system of caste was primarily based on the nature of occupations. He further opines that "the occupations which were organized into guilds slowly became exclusive and stratified into castes."²

¹ Alexander K. Nairne, *History of the Konkan*, Government Central Press, Bombay, 1894, p.x.

² G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, reprint, 1986, p. 114.

Max Weber on Indian religion argued that India is “a land...of the most inviolable organization by birth”³ and he said on the caste that the “is and remains social rank and the central position of the Brahmins in Hinduism rests more upon the fact that social rank is determined with reference to them than upon anything else.”⁴ The ideological category of the system of caste is called varnas - the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysayas and Sudras.⁵ In Sanskrit and the modern Indian languages, this system is called “the four-rank system” (*Chaturvarnasamstha*).⁶

The term “*Jati*” is the one most commonly used in the different parts of the country to refer to both castes and their subdivisions. Ghurye states that there were between 200 and 300 castes in each of the linguistic regions of India.⁷ Regarding social and cultural identity endogamy played a crucial role in the society. The society in Konkan was honeycombed with the castes, subcastes and its subdivisions with the result that it was very difficult to remove or at least to minimize the differences between them. The primary interest, being historical, the attempt here is to depict the caste and communities system as it emerged from the thoughts and action of the people themselves as reflected their daily social life as well as economically. The economic factor was at the root of the whole thing and the Konkan Coast was surrounded by geographical factors that helped in the economic activities. Caste consideration apart, members of a caste would naturally react when their occupation was encroached upon, and members of another caste jeopardized their economic interests.⁸

The social, economic and administrative functions affecting the entire community were divided amongst its members. There were some major groups among the Konkans are: *Bhandaris, Konkani Brahmins (Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins, Chitpavan Brahmins, Daivadnya Brahmins, Gaud Saraswat Brahmins), Gabits, Kolis, Marathas, Mahars, Konkani Muslims and Siddis*. The social life in Konkan under the Marathas was centered on the village communities. The village naturally became the centre of economic activities, but the role of caste and communities reflected its significance in this region. The kinds of lands in the villages were: *Wadi, Padi, Kheri, Majara, Mira, Peth*. In the village there were Balutedars and Mirasdars and the social function of Deshaks, Deshpande, Patil, Kulkarni, Shete, Mahajan⁹ were important. The coastal line of the Konkan coast was long and convenient which gave opportunities to the different communities to get engaged in maritime activities such as: fishing, sea-faring, sea-trade, navigation, ship-building,

³ Max Weber, *The Religion of India, Hinduism and Buddhism*, trs. H. H. Gerth and Don Martindale, Glencoe, III, The Free Press, New York, 1958, p. 3.

⁴ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Kegan Paul, London, 1947, p. 397.

⁵ Bernard Cohn, *India: The Social anthropology of a civilization*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 117.

⁶ Irawati Karve, *Hindu Society – An Interpretation*, Deccan College, Poona, 1961, p. 39.

⁷ G. S. Ghurye, *Caste, Class and Occupation*, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1961, p. 78.

⁸ Khobrekar, *Konkan: From the earliest to 1818 A.D.*, Snehvardhan Publishing House, Pune, 2002, p. 301.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 267-68.

salt-manufacturing, etc. Naval crew was recruited from the *Sonkolies*, *Bhandaris*, *Gabits*, *Bhois*, *Khavis* and *Daldis*.¹⁰

The Bhandaris are community who is famous for trading and they were also known as *Wanis*. They are also known as *Bhavagunas*. The historical evidence is that they were once largely employed as foot soldiers by the Marathas and the British. Fryer has mentioned about them in Bombay Island under the name of “*Bandareens*”. The occupation of the caste is believed to be palm juice drawing and distilling as a hereditary occupation. Some were traders and contractors. Some took to carpentry, masonry, tailoring, and some were sailors. The Bhandaris chiefly manufactured coir and cordage. Many were landless day labourers and are paid either in cash or in kind. The implements which may be said to be characteristic of the caste are a cutting instrument called *Kati* in some parts and *Aut* in others and a gourd vessel called *Kunda*.¹¹

The Chitpavan Brahmins, also known as *Kokanashta* (i.e. Brahmins native to the Konkan) were found in all parts of the Deccan and Konkan.¹² This community has given many public figures in Maratha Empire like Balaji Bajirao who belonged to this community. Balgangadhar Tilak and Swatantrya Veer Savarkar were few other noted figures from the region. The last immigrant to the Konkan were the Chitpavan and their surnames like as *Joshi*, *Karve*, *Bhat*, *Ranade*, *Gokhale*, *Vaidya*, *Bapat*, *Phadke* and *Tilak*. “The Konkanasth or Chitpavan Brahmans of the Western part of India have always been remarkable for their ability. It was under a Chitpavan dynasty that the Marathas had reached its highest point and afterwards declined to its fall. Chitpavans had adapted themselves to calmer times and were prominent at the bar, in education and in government service; but some there were who mourned the fallen glories of the Peshwas; and prominent among these was Bal Gangadhar Tilak, educationist and journalist”.¹³

The text *Sahyadrikhanda* discussed about the “how the sage Parsurama wrested the lands of the Konkan from the sea and then set about populating these lands with their many different Brahman communities. They are like the Chitpavans and Saraswats who were described as migrants into the region”. Hanlon argued in his article that “In the Konkan coast, Khoti tenures were offered as a form of hereditary revenue farm, granted as an incentive to boost cultivation particularly after periods of drought and dearth. The Chitpavan Brahmins in the Konkan held Khoti rights in the seventeenth century, while ‘*Javal*’; the name of a sub community of Brahmins in the

¹⁰A. R. Kulkarni, *Medieval Konkan: Its History, Society and Economy*, ed. by Jafri, *History, Ideas and Society*, New Delhi, 2014, p. 148.

¹¹R. E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, vol. I, Government Central Press, Bombay, 1920, p. 103.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹³H. H. Dodwell, *The Cambridge History of India: 1858-1918*, vol. 6, Cambridge University Press, London, 1932, p. 549.

southern Konkan was simply another term for a khoti landlord".¹⁴ In 1600-1700, there were many Chitpavan families from Rajapur and Ratnagiri who migrated to the Karavalli coastal region of Konkan and their language is Chitpavani and when Peshwa made a Maratha kingdom into Maharashtra, the Chitpavan immigration was started and replaced the Pingle dynasty of Peshwas.

When Chitpavan political leadership gained a new opportunity and created a newly kind of favorable situation. There are some of the *Kulas* (families) when they got some kind of equal importance and prosperity under the Peshwa regime; they are (i) *Patwardhan Kula*, (ii) *Bhave Kula* and (iii) *Chitpavan Kula*.¹⁵ During the Peshwa period, the Chitpavan Kula played a significant role in the administration, and their social and economic importance increased due to the Peshwa blessings. In the Peshwa's civil administration of the Peshwa period, the Chitpavan played an important role in the second half of the eighteenth century on the other side Chitpavans rose to prominence by money lending like the Khots and landlords; had practiced this profession in the Konkan. However, the nature of the Maratha state which had become dependent on annual military campaigns provided the best environment for the growth of this profession. There developed a close relationship between financiers and beaurocrats and military commanders.

The Peshwas military beaurocratic system required inputs of capital for revenue administration as well as military campaigns. Thus a number of Savkars and cloth traders arose to power and influence during the Peshwai. The *Vaidyas*, *Joshis*, *Thattes*, *Bhindses*, *Gadgils*, *Datars*, *Bivalkars* and *Oaks* were some of the leading Chitpavan money lending families of the time.¹⁶ It cannot be denied that the Chitpavans as a community were in an ideal situation to make the change. They had a history of taking to unconventional occupations like farming and the military, far removed from their traditional ones as Brahmins. The sub caste was part of the literate service class that emerged at the regional centers in the 18th century.¹⁷

The Patvardhans belonged to that Brahmin caste of Konkan who virtually monopolized the high posts of the peshwa and other important offices and thus became the 'new bureaucrats' in the 18th century. Priest Haribhat Patvardhan from Kouthala village in the district of Ratnagiri was considered to be the founder of the family. He became the family priest of a fief holder. The fief holders were enjoined to pay 16 percent (in fact 18 percent to 25 percent) of the annual collection to the peshwa's government. The Peshwa, as in the directly administered areas, sometimes ordered the fief-holders to collect and pay to the government the casual due of 10 percent on the land revenue from peasants as well as the impositions of casual tax

¹⁴ Rosalind O' Hanlon, 'Banaras Pundits and the Maratha Regions in Early Modern India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2010, pp. 209-10.

¹⁵ M. L. P. Patterson, 'Changing Patterns of Occupation among Chitpavan Brahmins', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1970, pp. 378-379.

¹⁶ V. D. Divekar, 'Emergence of an Indigenous Business Class in Maharashtra in the 18th century', *Modern Asian studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1982, pp. 432-438.

¹⁷ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the 18th to the Modern Age*, vol. 3, no.3, 1999, pp. 4-5.

from village-heads, village-accountants, heads and accountants of the market place, traders and artisans. In order to transact the business of administration and collection, the fief-holder sent collectors (*Mamledar or Kamavidar*) to various regions and resident officers (*Thanadar*) and stationing soldiers to the major towns and villages. The collectors were appointed from among the important retainers of the family, who would usually belong to the same Brahmin caste as the Patvardhans.¹⁸

The Brahmin caste had six subcastes, namely *the Chitpavans, the Karadas, the Sastekars, the Shenvis, the Kudaldeskars and Bardeskar* having certain differences in their way of life and also among their social relations.¹⁹ They were mostly zamindars by virtue of which they enjoyed a superior social and economic status in the village community. Besides performing their priestly duties, some of them were engaged in trading and commercial activities and some were holding government offices. The Khot was the chief landlord of the Konkan village. Panchang (Almanac) reading particularly to the illiterate section of the society was one of the duties of the Brahman community. This was common both in the Desh and Konkan areas.²⁰

It is very important to mention here that during the 18th century, Bombay rose in such a good place. The interesting fact, however, is that in the mid- seventeenth century, Bombay was only one and not even the most important one, of several indigenous Konkan port. The Shenoi Brahmins like as the *Sinays* and *Kamaths* had not suffered majorly from the caste restrictions on the sea travel as rule. There were number of Prabhus and Sinays had taken up residence in the city to carry on their ventures. They worked sometimes in partnership with the Bania merchants of the region carrying trade of grain along the coast. The Konkan being a grain surplus region, so the Konkani traders had for long been active in carrying grain. They traded with the ports of Malabar bringing black spices, sandalwood and betel in exchange for grain.²¹

The Gabit are found on the sea-coast chiefly in the Ratnagiri and Kanara districts and in the Savantvadi state. Gabit call themselves Konkani Marathas and stated that they were originally Marathas and manned the navy of Shivaji. Some of them are still known as *Gurabitandels* or captains of grabs, i.e. small vessels of war.²² The hereditary occupation of the caste is sea-faring and catching fish, which they also sell. Some of them hold land and a few are khots. Some are tenants of superior holders and some are day labourers and are paid either in cash or kind. They belongs to the Southern coast of Konkan, known as Ratnagiri, Sindhudhurg and Goa and they worked as Aarmar of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and the other side, Koli communities are primarily involved in the activities of farming and fishing and they

¹⁸ Fukazawa, *The Medieval Deccan, Peasants, Social Systems, and States Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988.p. 80-82.

¹⁹ Kulkarni, *Medieval Konkan*, p. 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Subramanian, 'Bombay and the West Coast in the 1740's', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 8, no.2, 1981, p.203.

²² Enthoven, vol. I, p. 347.

were belonged across the Konkan Coast. Their colonies mostly close to the seashore, which was known as *Koliwad*. There were two different groups in Koli. One is involving in sea-fishing of the western coast and the other is mainly tribe, founded in the forest of Sahyadri and Satpuda ranges.²³ There were divided into several subcastes, such as: *Malhar Koli, Son Koli, Mahadeo Koli, Mangela Koli, Dongar Koli* etc. They work as agricultural labourers and in the times of the Maratha Kingdom they were guardians of the middle reaches of the hill forts and as such received lands from the rulers.²⁴

Muslims immigrated to the Konkan, who came from Arabian Peninsula, Africa, and Malabar. Initially, they came as merchants but settled down in the Konkan. The Muslim community of the Konkan seems to be composite blend of both the Arabs and the Persians.²⁵ The Muslim coming from Ethiopia or Abyssinia who settled down in the north Konkan were called Habshis and Siddis and the Muslim community emerging out of the mixture of Hindu and Muslim blood to this day known as Konkani Muslims. The Muslim Community was mainly associated with maritime activities or professions related with the sea.

However, we know that land tenures, agriculture, revenue are played a vital role for making the whole figurative scale of socio-economic condition and to somehow it connected with socio economic structure. When Shivaji got full control over the Konkan, he divided his kingdom into three divisions. These divisions were to be under the supervision of Peshwa Moropant Pingle, Annaji Datto and Dadajipant Waknis. After the capture of the Konkan territory, Shivaji deputed Annaji Datto to assess the land in the Konkan.

The system of revenue in Konkan by Bajirao II all district revenue officers such as Mahar, Patil, Kulkarni, Sarhavaladar, Jamenis, Deshmukh, Deshpande were hereditary. The duties of these officials are explained in briefly. In Konkan, some places the Kulkarnis were the accountant but at many places, there was a Talati or village accountant. He had charge of eight to ten villages and was paid from Rs. 120 to 180 a year. It was his duty to visit each village every month, to see to the people's want and interests, to furnish accounts to the kamavisdar and to give each landholder an account showing his dues and payments.²⁶

The Gotsabhas played a crucial role in the social history of the Konkan. These Gotsabhas were loosely like caste panchayats or autonomous bodies which dealt with the affairs of particular Gots or communities. Their decisions were binding on all members of the community, and the political authorities intervened only when the

²³ Irawati Karve, *Maharashtra State Gazetteer, Maharashtra – Land and its people*, Maharashtra State, 1968, p. 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*,

²⁵ Kulkarni, *Medieval Konkan* , pp.143-44.

²⁶ R. D. Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1960, p. 19.

verdicts of one Gotsabhas conflicted with those of another in which case the dispute was submitted to the existing political authorities.²⁷

In this period, *Kunbi* caste consisted of a vast majority of the villagers who were cultivators, and they were subdivided into “*thulwaheeks* or hereditary cultivators and *uprees* or cultivators without any prescriptive rights in the soil. “The Kunbis recognized only to the extent of entrusting the oldest family in the community with the responsibility of collecting the land tax from the entire village. The members of the oldest family in the village, who represented it in its dealings with *mamlatdars* and other outsiders, were called *patils* and the senior most among them was called the *mukaddam patil*.”²⁸

Conclusion: The above study illustrates that caste and communities played a decisive role, particularly in the village of the Konkan coast. Socio-economic conditions gave stability and security to the whole region. The status was determined by indigenous social ranking and norms, established as the state apparatus and imposed on the ruled by the state. The division of their work on the basis of the caste system made a complete chain for stabilized economy but the apex caste dominated a most of the lower caste due to which a lot of insecurity existed in the social making. This is the general character of the status system in history and the system of caste and communities, however, deviated from this in some aspects. By and large, village community and land tenures stabilized the growth of trade and trading activities on the Konkan coastal region.

The methodological approach of my present study is indicated by its title; which emphasizes on social structure and their aspects, which connected with the economic perspective of the historical past of the Konkan. Through the above analysis, it seems that social and economic institutions which provided the frame of existence and several activities. When Bombay developed as a trading and industrial centre led to the migration of the people of the Konkan because their livelihood and mainly coastal trading activities especially maritime. It was developed mainly by the European Companies has been an integral part of the Konkan from the 17th to end of 18th century and after that British took over the some parts and ports of the Konkan. It became in the course of time one of the greatest centres of commerce and industry of the Indian sub-continent. Thus, Konkan being visited or inhabited by a number of foreigners in various capacities and motives and their interaction with the indigenous people, particularly their influence on the socio-economic life, leading to the formation of new social groups or communities, deserves a special attention, particularly from the point of socio-economic history of Konkan. Hence, the rural economy of the Konkan describing the geographical features of the region and introducing its different population groups (caste and communities) with their respective roles in their social life, their occupations, livelihood and economic condition.

²⁷Khobrekar, *Konkan: from the earliest to 1818 A.D.*, p. 347.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.