



Nomadic resilience: A Socio-Economic study of the Dhangar Tribe in Maharashtra

Sandeep Pal

PhD Scholar

South and Central Asian Studies

Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

Servesh Kumar Mani

Phd Scholar

Department of Performing & Fine Arts

Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

Abstract:-

The Dhangar tribe is a fascinating and vibrant nomadic group that hails from Maharashtra in India. They have a distinct way of life and rich cultural heritage. Land issues are among the major challenges faced by this community, which experiences marginalization in various spheres. This report is a holistic exploration of all aspects that surround the socio-economic and political conditions within which Dhangar people exist. This research explores many areas of their resilience to socioeconomic hurdles with specific reference to their customary modes of living, cultural practices, and impact of modernization on them. The analysis is done through qualitative and quantitative methodologies that encompass education, health access, land rights and governmental policies affecting the Dhangar society as a whole. In this paper we also look at the social economic impacts on herding work due to modern resources and climate changes as well as urbanization or decline in grasslands; The role of agriculture is also discussed in relation to the livelihoods' activities of this pastoral community while shifting from traditional work like herding upon industrial revolution and migration patterns in these communities. The research is based on primary as well as secondary data. key indicators such as income levels, education, and political representation are examined. By shielding light on their issues, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socioeconomic dynamics in contemporary Maharashtra.

Keywords:- Nomadic tribe, Dhangar, socioeconomic, traditional pastoralist, Livelihood, Government schemes.

Introduction

The present paper analyses the socio-economic conditions of the Dhangar tribe on different scales: income levels, education, healthcare, and land ownership. The Nomadic tribes are an integral part of Indian society, facing human rights violations. The nomadic tribes are not only neglected sections of society but also complex

communities as well. The problem of these tribes is not just grounded but also related to the roots of history. These are people who just not only suffered injustice but also lacked sufficient redressal and ignored in mainstream politics and academia (Milind, n.d.).

The Dhangar tribe is a vital part of Maharashtra's socio-cultural landscape, deeply intertwined with the state's agricultural and pastoral traditions. Known historically as nomadic pastoralists, they primarily rear sheep and goats. The name "Dhangar" comes from the Sanskrit word 'Dhenu,' which means cow, highlighting their deep connection with cattle. This community has played a crucial role in Maharashtra's economy, especially in dairy and meat production.

But there's more to the Dhangars than just their pastoral work. The Dhangar community's cultural legacy is rich with distinctive rites, traditions, and folk arts. Their nomadic lifestyle has shaped their worldview and social organization, fostering a tightly-knit and highly adaptable society. Despite the changes brought by modern times, many Dhangars continue to value and practice their traditional rituals, preserving their cultural heritage.

The grazing lands on which the Dhangars depend have been considerably reduced by urbanization and environmental changes, thus jeopardizing their traditional way of life. The Dhangars have faced these odds with remarkable calm. They persist in maintaining their customs and traditions despite pressures from the fast-changing world. Indeed, the cultural and social fabric of Maharashtra owes much to the Dhangar tribe for their Tribe. They have been both marginalized and have faced many challenges. Despite their valuable contribution, they often struggle to safeguard their way of life and cultural heritage. It is in this backdrop that the present research paper is an attempt to comprehend the socio-economic and political conditions of the Dhangar tribe in Maharashtra. The paper also looks at the trajectory of the Dhangar tribe from a historical perspective and documents key changes that are happening in customary practices at present. The research is aimed at investigating problems faced by the Dhangar community, such as marginalization, issues of land tenure, and the impact of climate change. It also aimed to provide a good overview of the adaptive strategies the Dhangar community employed toward dealing with adversities, which formed a key objective of the present study. Therefore, for formulating effective policies and provisions in respect of the needs and requirements of the Dhangar community, and their general welfare, a study into the various dimensions surrounding the Dhangar tribe is very urgent. The present study attempts to shed light on the socio-economic condition of one such marginalized people of India. It lays emphasis on safeguarding the cultural legacy with socio-economic progress. The present research is, thus, an effort in this direction to draw the attention of the policymakers toward the problems of the Dhangar tribe.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on empirical data, as the author has conducted interviews with various stakeholders. Based on the data collected through interviews, the author has made an attempt to analyse the socioeconomic status of the Dhangar community in the context of the contemporary challenges they are facing. In the present research, while studying the social, economic, and religious lifestyle primary data, images are collected from Bhimasahankar village in Pune district (Maharashtra) and used interviews of local residents of the village,

members of NGOs working among the Dhangar tribe, and leading representee of the community. A secondary factual collection procedure has been used to take an overview of the social, economic, and religious lifestyle of the Dhangars in Maharashtra. Given the limited availability of primary data on the Dhangar community's socio-economic conditions, we relied on secondary data from government censuses, surveys, and academic studies to provide a comprehensive overview. These sources offer large sample sizes, long-term trends, and established methodologies, enabling us to establish a robust foundation for our analysis. While acknowledging potential limitations in data specificity, we have carefully selected and triangulated data from multiple sources to enhance the reliability and validity of our findings. To address the data gaps, we complemented this with data from academic studies and NGO reports specifically focused on tribal communities in Maharashtra. By critically evaluating and triangulating these data sources, we were able to construct a robust picture of the Dhangar community's situation, acknowledging the inherent limitations of the available data.

Discussion and Findings

The study of the Dhangar tribe reveals significant socio-economic and cultural transformations driven by modernity, urbanization, and environmental challenges. These changes, while presenting new opportunities, have disrupted traditional lifestyles and posed critical challenges to the community's resilience. The findings are categorized into four major themes: Socio-Cultural Aspect of the Dhangar Tribe, Socio-Economic Conditions of the Dhangar Community, Challenges Faced by the Dhangar Community, Resilience and Adaptation, Political Participation and Representation. All these themes are below described with careful connections and with the help of the interviews and data available.

2. Socio-Cultural Aspect of the Dhangar Tribe

Even though the Dhangar tribe had contributed a lot to the socio-cultural heritage of Maharashtra, they had been marginalised and faced significant challenges. The precarious interconnected factors such as social, political, economic, and environmental increased their hardship. The loss of land, decrease in grazing areas, had impacted their traditional ways of living. The Dhangar tribe has often been overlooked in development initiatives, resulting in limited access to education, healthcare, and other vital services.¹

2.1 Historical background and origin of the Dhangar tribe

Dhangars, also called Gavadas in the Satara District, are people located in the Deccan, Konkan, and Southern Maratha Country. Their number was 467,622 in 1901 census, with 232,901 males and 234,721 females of Indian descent. As for where they came from, the Jativiveka² claims that their ancestors are Mahishya women and Shudra fathers; Once more, it is claimed that the Mahishya is the child of a Kshatriya and a Vaishya mother. As per an antiquated custom, they were made from Shiva's body's dust. King Chhatrapati Shahu of Kolhapur, a Maratha, married his cousin Yashwantrao to Holkars. The Holkars were Dhangars by caste (Kulkarni, 2023).

¹ Interview of a member of NGO(Dhangar samaj Kranti sangh)

² The Jativiveka (Discrimination of Species) is an Indian classical text which deals with topics related to the classification and logical analysis of concepts and categories

According to yet another custom, the sage Tapa was their initial progenitor. According to a third tale, Khandoba³ once encountered their ancestor while out for a stroll in a forest. He allegedly rendered them speechless with amazement by demonstrating his supernatural abilities. The Dhangar and his kin started worshipping after that implicitly devoted to Khandoba and presented his daughter Banai to the god, who approved of her marriage. Khandoba, as such gratefully bestowed upon him the blessing that he and his heirs would raise and care for sheep and make a decent life doing so (Enthoven, 1901, pp. 311-321). According to British administrator R.E Enthoven who is the writer of the book titled “Tribes and Castes of Bombay” formed a part of the ethnographic survey of India; the Dhangars in Deccan and Konkan lost their tribal significance, and came to denote a heterogeneous group of distinct races who were shepherders.

From their ancestral villages in western Maharashtra to the verdant and rich regions of the Konkan, Wai Desh, Mawal (a region in Pune District), and Marathwada, the Dhangar clan follows a well-travelled migration route. In order to guarantee enough grazing for their cattle, the migration frequently involves traveling through grasslands, plateaus, and hilly terrain while adhering to seasonal patterns of grass growth. However, exact itineraries may differ. (Kavita, Pravin and Kale, Gulabrao, 2023)

The Dhangar tribe's migration represents a vibrant cross-cultural interchange between these formerly nomadic people and the established Konkan groups. The Dhangars carry with them their distinct customs, songs, and legends. Additionally, they interact with the villages' traditions and customs, promoting cultural variety and enhancing the group's overall the region's legacy. This exchange of cultures acts as a link between customs and contemporary perceptions, maintaining cultural identity but accepting change (Kavita, Pravin and Kale, Gulabrao, 2023). While these interconnections have shaped the Dhangar community's history, they have also brought challenges. Discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization have been persistent issues. However, these interactions have also fostered resilience and adaptability.

Historically, the Dhangar tribe was crucial to the state's economy, providing essential products like milk, meat, wool, and leather. Their nomadic lifestyle often brought them into close contact with agrarian communities, fostering interdependence. The Dhangar culture, characterized by its many oral traditions, traditional songs, and dances, has made a significant contribution to the cultural fabric of Maharashtra. Although, there is limited documentation, there are signs that certain Dhangar clans were involved in the armed forces of different dynasties and kingdoms, fulfilling roles as infantrymen and horsemen. With a population of approximately 15 million, the Dhangar group is a significant demographic, rendering them a pivotal voting bloc in numerous constituencies. The community has exhibited a growing level of political awareness, as seen by the establishment of multiple Dhangar organizations and associations. These organizations have been crucial in championing the rights and interests of the community. The preservation of Dhangar culture and traditions has been gaining momentum, with the community actively participating in cultural festivals and activities.

³ A Dhangar god which is worshiped as incarnation of Lord Shiva

2.3 Geographical distribution and population

The tribe is divided into around 20 subcaste groups. (C, Mohan, & V, 1995) This tribe is specifically located in the eastern part of the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. Their traditions and customs have played a significant role in shaping the socioeconomic fabric of the state for a considerable period of time. The Dhangar tribe is predominantly situated in the western areas of Maharashtra, encompassing significant locations such as Satara, Sangli, Ahmednagar, Pune, and Kolhapur. The regions are characterised by diverse topography, including hills, plateaus, and meadows, providing an ideal habitat for the tribe's semi-nomadic lifestyle and rural way of life. (Kavita Pravin & Kale Gulabrao, 2023.)

Mapping the distribution of the Dhangar population across Maharashtra

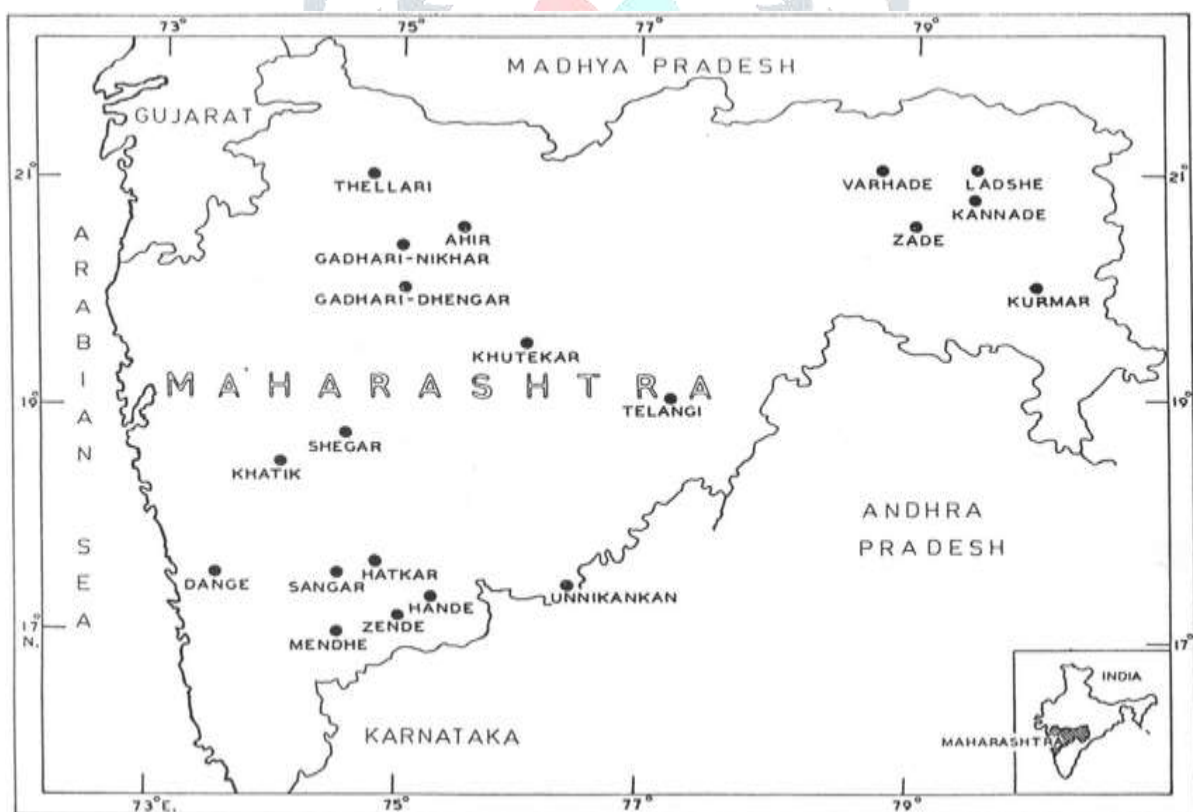


Figure 1 (Malhotra, Reddy, & Bhanu, 1996)

Fig Map of Maharashtra showing the focal areas of the distribution of the twenty Dhangar castes. Data Source:(Malhotra, Reddy, & Bhanu, 1996)

Shepherds known as Dhangars are primarily found in Marathwada and Western Maharashtra. The community's estimated population is one crore, or around 9% of Maharashtra's total population of roughly 11.25 crore (The Indian Express, 2019)

The Dhangar community's traditional pastoral lifestyle distinguishes them from many other tribal and rural communities that primarily rely on agriculture. The Dhangar community's social structure, characterized by a strong emphasis on kinship and lineage, exhibits both similarities and differences with other tribal groups.

2.4 Traditional lifestyle, economy, and social organization



Fig. Sheep grazing by a Dhanger tribe member. (Village -Bhimasahankar Pune), Data Source: Field visit by author

The Dhanger community's economy has traditionally relied on pastoralism. For decades, their way of life has been defined by their nomadic lifestyle, which revolves upon raising livestock, especially sheep and goats. The Dhanger people possess exceptional skills in the nurturing and administration of their livestock. This encompasses the processes of animal reproduction, nourishment, and safeguarding against ailments and predators. In order to secure access to new grazing lands and water sources, the Dhangers historically adhered to a seasonal movement pattern. The technique, referred to as dhangerwadi, entailed relocating from one area to another depending on the accessibility of resources. In addition to their main occupation of sheep and goat rearing, the Dhanger communities also participated in the breeding of cattle and buffalo. This diversification aided in reducing the risks linked to variations in animal prices. The cultural identity of the Dhanger community was closely interwoven with pastoralism. It influenced their social organisation, principles, and perspective on the world. The Dhanger society is structured based on clans (kul) and sub-clans (gotra), which serve to establish social connections and regulate marriage customs. The Dhanger community traditionally followed a patrilineal system, tracing lineage through the male line. Extended families, comprising multiple generations living together, were common. This provided support and security in the challenging pastoral environment.

2.5 Cultural practices, beliefs, and rituals



Fig. A Dhangar tribe member in traditional clothes. (Village -Bhimasahankar Pune), Data Source: Field visit by author

The caste identifies as Hindu and is divided into the Shaiva and Bhagavat groups. Their favoured gods are Mahadeva of Udgiri in Kolhapur and Vithoba of Pandharpur. Particularly the lesser gods. The caste worships Khandoba and Bahiroba. Dhangars assert that they have been honouring Khandoba since their ancestor, who, as previously noted, initially started to admire and awe the god when he demonstrated his wondrous abilities in a woodland. Their house god of tutelage, Bahiroba, is depicted as interred with the wealthy people's corpses(Enthoven, 1901)



Fig. Dhangar God Shri Khandoba Dev i.e., incarnation of lord Shiva (Village -Bhimasahankar Pune), Data Source: Field visit by author

The Dhangar tribe still values fare celebrations highly, even in the twenty-first century. They continue to rejoice rituals by setting up festivals honouring their caste's god. The Dhangar people are dispersed throughout India and Maharashtra operating under several identities. Dhangar's Social life is typical. A few sub castes within this. They have a basic quality of living and separate from many tribes. Their primary Blanket knitting is the business. Within this tribe, the joint family system is significantly higher. Recognising the ambiguity in traditional and cultural life. Songs, marriage rituals, Jatra, worship rituals, sacrifices, and other elements set the Dhangar culture apart.

Haldi Festival



Fig Haldi festival celebrated by the Dhangar community. (Data Source-ESamskriti, <https://www.esamskriti.com/a/Maharashtra/HALDI-Festival-Kodoli-Kolhapur.aspx>)

Dussehra is a major festival of the Dhangar community living in the hilly areas of Goa, Maharashtra and Karnataka. On this festival, the community come together in their villages to show unity. Mhalchi Pandhari is the goddess of nature. Gaja dances are performed with traditional rituals and drums and plates

Folk literature includes the genre of folklore. In the ceremonial practice, the goal is to reach spirit of community through enhancing and enhancing the divinities. The following gods and goddesses the different Dhangar customs. Following birth, rituals associated with marriage and death, as well as Only religious principles are contained in these rites(Parkhe & Salok, n.d.)

2.5 Language and Literature

Marathi is the most spoken language among Dhangars of Maharashtra, with some subgroups of tribes speaking various dialects. The Ahir sub-group uses Ahirni or Gavli boli, which is a mix of Marathi and Gujarati. The Dhangar tribe, with its nomadic lifestyle and limited access to formal education, has developed a rich oral

tradition that serves as a repository of their history, culture, and knowledge. Dhangars have a very rich tradition of folk songs and ballads that narrate historical events and love affairs, along with giving social commentary. Such songs are sung during work and festivals. Their wisdom is enshrined in their proverbs and sayings, which impart lessons on agriculture, animal husbandry, and social relations. It is an oral tradition that gives life and vigour to Dhangar rituals and ceremonies. Some of these rituals were also transmitted down the generations in an accurate form.

3. Socio-Economic Conditions of the Dhangar Community

3.1 Socio-economic indicators: income levels, poverty, and inequality



Fig. Sheep shearing by Dhangar tribe (Data Source-Author's Fieldwork)

The Dhangar community's income sources have historically been primarily derived from pastoralism. However, due to various socioeconomic and environmental changes, income diversification has become essential. Animal husbandary, agriculture, wage labours are some other sources of income in the Dhangars tribe. Those with larger landholdings or more livestock tend to have higher incomes. Income inequality within the Dhangar community is a concern, with a small percentage of households controlling a disproportionate share of wealth. Generally, the Dhangar community exhibits lower income levels compared to other rural and tribal populations in the state. Dhangar income is often characterized by higher volatility due to its dependence on agriculture, animal husbandry, and market fluctuations. Income disparities within the Dhangar group are influenced by factors such as geographic location, resource availability, and the extent to which alternative livelihoods are pursued⁴.

⁴ Interview of Dhangar scholar Bapu Hatkar

.2 Land ownership and access: Challenges and implications



Fig: Grazing land (Village- Bhimasahankar, Pune)

The Dhangar community has always relied on land as a vital resource for grazing their livestock. Traditionally, they depended on communal grazing pastures, known as gochar, for their animals. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, land ownership was not a significant priority for them. The Dhangars followed seasonal movement patterns in search of fertile grazing sites, emphasizing the importance of communal land access over private ownership.

However, land reforms have led to significant fragmentation of Dhangar landholdings. The transformation of grazing pastures into agricultural fields, industrial zones, and urban areas has reduced the availability of pasture for Dhangar animals. Many Dhangar households experience precarious land tenure, often lacking official land titles or facing encroachment on their land. A considerable segment of the Dhangar community lacks land ownership and relies on wage employment or other means of sustenance. Due to the diminishing availability of grazing areas, many Dhangars have been forced to transition from pastoralism to agriculture or other professions⁵.

3.3 Livelihood patterns: Traditional herding, agriculture, and other occupations

In decades, the Dhangar community has experienced substantial changes in their traditional pastoral way of life. The transformation of grazing pastures into agricultural fields, urban areas, and industrial zones has diminished the accessibility of pasture for animals. The government regulations, such as land reforms and forest conservation measures, can impose limitations on the mobility of pastoralists and their cattle. Due to the declining sustainability of pastoralism, numerous Dhangar villages have been forced to transition to a settled way of life.

⁵ Interviews of Member of tribe and NGO



Fig: Livestock (Village: Bhimasahankar, Pune)

3.4 Impact of modernization on livelihood: Industrialization, urbanization, and migration

Industrialization has hit very hard in the Dhangar group and has been quite bad, altering their significant lifestyle and land use. Industrialization processes largely involve acquisition of land whereby grazing pastures are lost and the pastoralism of the Dhangars reduced. The innumerable industrial projects displace Dhangar communities from their land and forcefully resettle them in urban regions, marring their traditional lifestyle.

3.5 Role of women in the Dhangar community



Fig: Dhangar women preparing food

Traditionally, Women are primarily responsible for household works, including cooking, cleaning, and childcare. They played a crucial role in the management of livestock, particularly dairy animals. A significant number of

women participated in traditional crafts and handicrafts as a means of augmenting the household income. They actively participate in social and religious ceremonies, ensuring the preservation of cultural traditions. Women's involvement in the work force is growing, which is helping to increase household income. Although patriarchal standards continue to dominate in numerous instances, there is an increasing inclination towards women's involvement in making decisions within the household. Although some progress has been made, there are still inequalities in the availability of education and healthcare for Dhangar women. Women's opportunities and choices are still restricted by gender-based discrimination and prejudices.

4. Challenges Faced by the Dhangar Community

In a recent conversation with a representative from the Dhangar Samaj Kranti Seva Sangh, an NGO dedicated to supporting the Dhangar community, several major challenges were discussed. One of the biggest issues is the difficulty the Dhangars face in obtaining essential government documents, such as Aadhar identity cards, voter IDs, and PAN cards. These documents are crucial for accessing various services and benefits. In addition, the Dhangar community struggles with limited access to banking facilities, which makes it hard for them to manage their finances and engage fully in the economic system. The representative also pointed out significant instances of social discrimination, which adds another layer of difficulty to the challenges they face. These barriers collectively hinder the Dhangar people's ability to improve their socio-economic situation and integrate more fully into society.. The Dhangar tribe often faces limitations imposed by villagers when it comes to allowing their livestock to graze. In some instances, these restrictions escalate to acts of violence against members of the Dhangar community or harm inflicted upon their animals. These activities indicate the persistent disputes between the sedentary village residents and the nomadic Dhangar community. In addition, the representative emphasised the existence of systematic deficiencies in law enforcement, specifically pointing out that the police frequently decline to officially record First Information Reports (FIRs) submitted by members of the Dhangar community. The absence of legal protections makes the Dhangar community even more vulnerable. During the COVID-19 outbreak, their situation worsened. Villagers imposed a ban on the Dhangars, preventing them from accessing government-provided rations and other aid. This increased their hardships, highlighting the ongoing marginalization and socio-economic challenges the Dhangar people face.

4.1 Marginalization and discrimination



Fig: Dhangar women preparing food (village- Bhimasahankar, Pune)

The Dhangar community, frequently classified as a lower caste, encountered substantial prejudice in relation to their social standing, availability of resources, and prospects. The conventional itinerant way of life of the Dhangar was frequently stigmatised, with the community being characterised as 'regressive' or 'uncultured.' The Dhangar community remains subject to social ostracism in specific localities, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The Dhangar community continues to face enduring negative perceptions, which have a detrimental effect on their social and economic prospects. The Dhangar community's low socio-economic status has been influenced by discrimination.

4.2 Land tenure issues and conflicts

Historically, Dhangar people depended on communal resources such as grazing pastures and forest regions to sustain themselves. The lack of official land titles and property rights rendered Dhangar communities susceptible to land intrusion. The implementation of extensive infrastructure projects has resulted in the appropriation of Dhangar lands without sufficient reparation or resettlement. Although land reform initiatives have been designed to redistribute land, their execution has frequently proven inefficient in meeting the requirements of the Dhangar population. Several Dhangar groups do not possess official land titles, which creates challenges in asserting ownership rights. India's land rules are frequently intricate and unclear, which can lead to chances for abuse and manipulation. The Dhangar communities encounter prejudice in court processes, where their assertions are frequently disregarded or discarded. The presence of corruption within the land administration system impedes the Dhangar communities' ability to obtain land rights. A significant number of individuals belonging to the Dhangar community lack knowledge about their land rights and the legal procedures required to obtain them.

4.3 Access to education, healthcare, and other basic services

The conventional itinerant way of life followed by the Dhangar community frequently hindered children's schooling due to the constant relocation in pursuit of grazing lands. A significant number of Dhangar communities inhabit isolated regions with restricted availability of educational institutions. The prevalence of poverty and financial hardships in Dhangar households frequently compels children to discontinue their education in order to contribute to their families' financial needs. Many Dhangar communities live in areas with poor infrastructure, making it difficult to reach healthcare facilities. Limited access to transportation options hinders the ability of Dhangar people to seek medical care in case of emergencies. Due to poor sanitation and hygiene conditions, Dhangar people are susceptible to diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhoea. Close interaction with livestock exposes Dhangar communities to zoonotic diseases. Dhangar communities residing in arid and semi-arid regions often face acute water scarcity, particularly during dry seasons. In many cases, the available water sources are contaminated with pollutants, leading to waterborne diseases. Reliance on traditional water harvesting methods, like ponds and wells, may not be sufficient to meet the community's needs. Many Dhangar families do not own their homes, leading to insecurity and vulnerability to eviction.



Fig: Dhangar women bringing water

4.4 Impact of government policies and programs

There are around 13 provisions and schemes for the welfare of the Dhangar community listed on the websites of other backward Bahunjan welfare departments (Govt. of Maharashtra). However, due to less awareness and lack of will of executive departments, these are not fulfilling the needs of the tribe. (Source- Interview of a member of an NGO)

4.5 Impact of climate change and environmental challenges on the Dhangar community

Drought exerts a profound effect on pastoral nomads in India, whose livelihoods are critically dependent on grazing lands and water resources. Prolonged drought conditions can lead to a decrease in the availability of these essential resources, consequently diminishing income derived from the sale of livestock and limiting access to milk and other animal products for household consumption. This situation exacerbates food insecurity and poverty among pastoral nomads, who frequently have limited resources and few alternative livelihood options to mitigate the adverse effects of drought (Asefa et al., 2022; Stavi et al., 2021).

Several factors are pushing the Dhangars away from their traditional lifestyle. As more land is used for farming, and with new environmental regulations and government land acquisitions, there's less space available for grazing. In the past, Dhangars and farmers had a good understanding, but changing farming practices have upset this balance.

In addition to this, urbanization is also a big factor. Cities like Mumbai and Pune are drawing many Dhangars, especially the younger generation, with new job opportunities. This shift to urban areas means that more and more Dhangars are moving away from their traditional ways of life and exploring new economic possibilities in the cities¹.

5: Resilience and Adaptation

5.1 Strategies employed by the Dhangar community to face the challenges

There are, however, several strategies that the Dhangar communities have adopted which have helped them overcome these challenges. The most potent factor has been the integration of agriculture and livestock rearing. This would give them diversified income sources and hence be able to manage the available resources. Many Dhangars have also explored other livelihood options, such as entrepreneurship, manual labour, and employment in the public sector. Although the traditional long-distance migration is now less frequent, some Dhangars still undertake seasonal migrations in search of better grazing lands. This mix of old and new is their adaptability and resilience in the face of change.

5.2 Dhangar traditional knowledge and practices in adaptation.

The Indigenous knowledge system (IKS) is the backbone of survival and adaptation for pastoralist groups like Dhangars. It is age-old wisdom with a very rich tradition of knowledge of livestock behavior, ecology, and health passed down through generations. Traditional breeding and selection practices helped in conserving these desirable traits related to resistance to diseases, high milk production, and the potential to perform better under harsh climatic conditions. Procedures for castration, dehorning, and foot care have been perfected over generations of years. In this respect, local knowledge about pasture management among Dhangar herders describes strategies of rotation and fallowing to regenerate common land for long-term use. They have used this wisdom to adapt to changing weather patterns, observing early signs of climate change and adjusting livestock rearing accordingly (Narbat, 2023). Their knowledge of medicinal plants for cattle illness treatments has been

useful, especially in remote areas where veterinary services are modern. Such practices as the isolation of sick animals and cleanliness of the environment have gone a long way in controlling disease breakouts. Finally, knowledge of animal behavior has facilitated the early detection of some diseases and other health-related problems.

5.3 Role of NGOs and civil society organizations in supporting the Dhangar community

In an interview with a member of an NGO(Dhangar samaj Kranti sewa sangh) who works for the welfare of the Dhangar tribe. He said that NGOs help them to be aware of wellness schemes and help them get voter cards, aadhar cards, PAN cards, bank accounts, etc. These NGOs protect this tribe from exploitation and hooliganism of other people and help them to register FIR against this hooliganism and provide legal help to this tribe. These NGOs helped the tribe at the time of COVID-19 both emotionally and economically. These NGOs bring the problems of the tribes to the attention of the government with different means such as agitation, peace march, street play, etc.

5.4 Successful adaptation and resilience

Dhangar Communities in Maharashtra's Western Ghats successfully integrated agriculture with livestock rearing, reducing their dependence solely on pastoralism. Some Dhangar communities in this region have explored non-timber forest products (NTFP) collection and value addition as supplementary income sources. Dhangar Communities in Marathwada Region have shifted from traditional sheep and goat rearing to dairy farming or poultry to reduce income volatility. Dhangar Communities in Vidarbha Region have successfully integrated cotton farming into their livelihood strategies. (Narbat, 2024)

6. Political Participation and Representation

6.1 Political awareness and participation among the Dhangar community

The Dhangar community has not been given candidates in proportion to its population by the ruling and opposition parties, but the voters rejected those who were given, so only one representative of the Dhangar community will now appear in the assembly after winning in 2019 Maharashtra assembly election. Also, since this representative is also from the opposition party, there is a feeling in the society that it will be difficult for this society to get justice (Report by ETV Bharat). Due to the low literacy rate and lack of political awareness among the community, there is not any leadership for the Dhangar community in Maharashtra, which is why their voting patterns are not united. Low literacy rates, financial burdens, geographical isolation, and less awareness are factors that affect the voting pattern and political participation of the Dhangar community. According to the ETV Bharat report, there were only 12 combined candidates fielded by Mahayuti and Vikas Aghadi in the 2019 elections.

6.2 Representation of Dhangar interests in government bodies

The government has taken various measures to elevate the community and to add the community in the streamline of modern civilization. The other backward Bahujan welfare department of Maharashtra has designed various provisions for the welfare of the Dhangar community.

1. Provision of one-time lump sum financial assistance in the form of grant for purchase of land for semi-confined, captive sheep rearing for landless shepherd families under the state level scheme for the beneficiaries of Dhangar and similar communities.
2. Provision of houses for the homeless families of Dhangar community belonging to Nomadic Tribe-C category
3. Provision of Margin Money to assist the women of Dhangar Samaj belonging to the Nomadic Tribe-C category in the Stand-Up Scheme of the Central Government.
4. Provision of subsidy for Dhangar community to uplift their poultry management.
5. An independent scheme for the students of Dhangar community who are deprived of hostel scheme on the grounds of self-development scheme of Tribal Development Department.

Due to factors such as insufficient education, lack of awareness, social marginalization, and political underrepresentation, the aforementioned schemes have not effectively reached the Dhangar community. According to a report by ETV Bharat, although the Dhangar community was represented by five Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in 2014, it currently has only one representative in the Maharashtra Assembly. Despite being the second largest community in the state, the Dhangar community remains politically marginalized. Additionally, their nomadic lifestyle contributes to their limited representation in local governance bodies, such as gram panchayats and block panchayats.

6.3 Role of political parties and leaders in addressing Dhangar issues

The Dhangars population is about 9% of Maharashtra's population. They play a significant role in elections at four of the state's 48 Lok Sabha seats (Baramati, Madha, Solapur, Satara), and about 30-35 of the 288 seats in the state Assembly. Dhangar leader Mahadeo Jankar, the chief of the Rashtriya Samaj Paksha. RSP didn't win any seat in the Lok Sabha or Assembly elections, but he was given the portfolio of dairy development and animal husbandry with cabinet rank in the Fadnavis govt. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis had announced that the Maharashtra government would extend all social welfare schemes available to schedule tribe to the Dhangar tribe(Explained_ Who Are the Dhangars of Maharashtra, and Why Do They Want ST Status_ _ Explained News - The Indian Express, n.d.).Congress party's member of parliament from Solapur, Pranati Shinde, raised his voice in parliament for caste census and demanded Schedule tribe reservation for Dhangar tribe(The Hindu, 2024)The nationalist Congress Party (NCP) also supports the ST reservation for the Dhangar tribe(The Economics times, 2014), and the NCP leader Supriya Sule demands the ST reservation and raises her voice in Parliament(Maure, 2023). The other main political party, Shiv Sena, also supported the Dhangar reservation many times(Pti, 2018). Political patronage within the Dhangar tribe has a significant negative impact on its development. Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, one of the prominent organizations of Yashwant sena representing the

members of the Dhangar community in Maharashtra held a meeting in Beed and resolved to field candidates as independents for the Lok Sabha elections in the district and different parts of the state(The Times of India, 2024). There are opportunities for political mobilization and collective action within the Dhangar community for their own wellness. Strong political representation from within the Dhangar community can lead to increased empowerment and a stronger voice in decision-making processes.

Pastoral nomadic tribes face significant challenges in maintaining their political influence at both local and national levels. Despite the prominence of Kuruba (shepherd) figures like Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and emerging Dhangar leaders in Maharashtra politics, including BJP politicians Ram Shinde and Gopichand Padalkar, as well as Sakshna Salgar of NCP (Sharad Pawar faction), the community's social narratives, traditions, and culture are at risk of being appropriated through Brahmanization(The Indian Express, 2024). Leaders of the Dhangar community in Maharashtra, such as Mahadeo Jankar of the RSP, are striving to establish an autonomous political center for their community.

6.4 Advocacy efforts and policy recommendations

It is recommended to get the proper and accurate census and demographic data through a caste census to frame a policy for the development and welfare of the Dhangar tribe. It is recommended to give rights to herd livestock in protected forests, sanctuaries, etc, to tribe as grazing lands are decreasing rapidly. Free medical services for tribe and livestock as there is less hygiene is taken in pastoral works. Conservation and preservation of tribe and their culture. Loan schemes for buying livestock, providing them with solar lamps, and connecting them with solar energy. Policy recommendation for education and medical, especially for the Dhangar tribe. It is mandatory and recommended that a survey be conducted to find the root cause of poverty, illiteracy, and troubles faced by the Dhangar tribe.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study of the Dhangar tribe of Maharashtra reveals a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors that have shaped the trajectory of this historically significant community. The tribe, known for its pastoral heritage and cultural contributions, faces significant challenges due to modernization, urbanization, and environmental degradation. These forces have disrupted traditional livelihoods, leading to shifts in social structures and economic activities.

The findings underscore that the reduction in grazing lands and industrialization have pushed many Dhangars to abandon their nomadic pastoral lifestyle, transitioning to settled agriculture or urban labor. This shift, while opening new opportunities, has often been accompanied by socio-economic disparities and cultural erosion. Marginalization and limited access to resources such as education, healthcare, and land rights remain critical issues, exacerbating the community's vulnerability.

Despite these adversities, the Dhangar tribe has displayed remarkable resilience and adaptability. The integration of agriculture with livestock rearing, the adoption of alternative livelihoods, and the preservation of cultural practices through festivals and oral traditions reflect their capacity to navigate the challenges of a

changing world. Moreover, the role of NGOs and grassroots initiatives has been pivotal in empowering the community and advocating for their rights.

The study highlights the need for a holistic policy framework to address the unique challenges of the Dhangar tribe. This includes enhancing access to education and healthcare, ensuring land and grazing rights, and providing targeted financial and technical support to promote sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, preserving the cultural heritage of the Dhangar tribe should be a priority, recognizing it as a valuable component of Maharashtra's socio-cultural fabric.

By understanding the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of the Dhangar tribe, this research contributes to a broader discourse on the challenges faced by marginalized communities in contemporary India. It is imperative for policymakers, academics, and civil society to collaborate in creating inclusive development strategies that uphold the dignity, rights, and cultural identity of the Dhangar community while fostering their socio-economic advancement.

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Annexure I

Empirical Data: Based on Interviews

Interview 1

Author: What is the demography of Dhangar in Maharashtra?

Interviewee 1: Around 3 crore.

Author. What are the problems faced by the Dhangar tribe?

Interviewee 1: Dhangars didn't get an ST reservation in Maharashtra. Dhangars are categorized in OBC. DR. Ambedkar is listed in Sr. no 36 of the SC List. And allow Dhangar to graze in the field. There should not be any restriction on the grazing area of Dhangars herd. Dhangar should allowed to have arms so that they can protect themselves from dangerous animals in the forest. Villagers often have conflicts with Dhangar nomads. If our herds enter their field, either they beat Dhangar or harm our sheep's cattle. Even the police did not register complaints about Dhangar. Even Dhangar discriminated on a caste basis. During Corona, Dhangar did not get 10 kg of wheat or rice, to my knowledge, anywhere in Maharashtra. Dhangar does not have any banking facility. They did not get loans. They do not even have any Adhar cards or pan cards.

Author: What is the literacy rate among Dhangars, and What are their occupations?

Interviewee 1: Almost 70% of Dhangars are illiterate or do not get any basic education. They still follow their nomadic life of rearing sheep and do not give attention to any education.

Author: What work does your NGO do for Dhangars?

Interviewee 1: Dhangar did not get representation in gram panchayats. Their issue and problem are not represented. We tried to put their problem with adequate authority and tried to add them to mainstream society.

Interview 2.

Author: What is your NGO name?

Interviewee 2: Dhankar samaj Kranti seva Sangh

Author: What did your NGO do

Interviewee 2: Our Ngo works for the welfare of the Dhangar tribe. Many Dhangar have not registered as voters yet. We tried to help them enroll for electoral voter ID cards. They did not have an Aadhar, PAN card, or bank account. Dhankar should have arms to protect them in the jungle. The Dhangar cattle transgresses farmers' fields, and farmers kill their cattle. Villagers have a constant conflict with Dhankar, and sometimes they beat Dhangars. Police did not register their case. Even Corona villagers tried to prohibit Dhangar from entering the village. They did not even allow Dhangar cattle to drink water. Only 20 percent of people are educated, and the rest live

nomadic lives and graze cattle. Dhankar does not have agricultural land. Dhangars are not politically united and do not agitate for their rights. Our NGO tried to unite Dhangars for their welfare.

Author: Since when has your NGO been working for the Dhangar tribe?

Interviewee 2: from 4-5 years. Our NGO does not get any support. I have worked for seven years in Dhangar but have not gotten any assistance from anywhere. At the time of corona, we helped Dhangar at our expense, but we did not get any financial support.

Author: What difficulty do you face while working for Dhangars?

Interviewee 2: Politically, there are many agitation Morcha and rallies, but all of them are of no use. Only political parties come to us during elections. No one helps even after the said political party comes into power, which promises to elevate the Dhangar. The government calls thousands of forms to give sheep to Dhangar but gives cattle to only two -to three people among the thousands who had applied.

Author: Do Dhangar don't vote?

Interviewee 2: Firstly, Dhangar, who are nomads, do not vote. Even those Dhangar living in the Village are politically unaware. Dhangar has 2nd largest population in Maharashtra. There are only a few Dhangar who became sarpanch. They don't even have one percent political representation. In Maharashtra, Dhangars are listed in OBC, but in some states, Dhangars are listed in the ST category. Some Dhangars are nomads, while some are living in villages. The conditions of both are very harsh. Those who live nomadic life face trouble finding grazing fields. Those who lived in the village didn't have sufficient agricultural land. Dhangars are even unaware of the benefits of reservation that It will help them to improve their condition.

Author: What are the Challenges for Dhangar

Interviewee 2: No demographic data or caste census of Dhangars is available. The Dhangar tribe did not get support from the media. They do not get education. There is no electric facility for Dhangar. The government should provide solar lamps and lights to Dhangar so that they can safely live in the jungle.

Author: Are there any government policies for Dhangar representation in Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha, or Rajya Sabha?

Interviewee 2: No, Political parties only divided Dhangar community

Author: What recommendations do you suggest?

Interviewee 2: Firstly, grazing in Dhangar should not be restricted. 2ndly, medical facilities should be available for Dhangars, who live in the forest region. First, the government should register Dhangar as a citizen of India; at least Dhangar should be registered in the electoral process. 3rdly, Dhangars should get bank accounts with less paperwork as they do not have PAN cards or Adhar cards. They do not have residence certificates. 3. Dhangars should get permission to keep arms for their protection. 4. There should be adequate provision for nomads Dhangar for their education. 5th loans should be made available for Dhangar to buy sheep. 6th Solar lights

should be provided to Dhangars. There should be medical facilities for pregnant women. There should be a survey of the Dhangar community, including all aspects like demography, education, and economics. TISS conducted a survey about the Dhangar community, but the government has not published the report to date. I was present with the TISS team for the Dhangar survey.

Author: In which part of Maharashtra your NGO is working?

Interviewee 2: Only in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra

Interview 3

Author: You have worked for the Dhangar tribe, can you brief me about the historical background of the Dhangar community

Interviewee 3: This community never lived in the village, and now they do not feel comfortable living in villages. They lived as pastoralists. When the population was less and the jungle was vast. Dhangar tribe gets adequate resources. Now the situation is worse because farmers not allow Dhangars to graze their cattle. Dhangar women are harassed by landlords. I suggest they change their occupation. They should rear cows and buffaloes instead of sheep and goats.

Author: What is the role of government?

Interviewee 3: The government is only pressured by agitation and riots, but Dhangar is not so strong. They did not have voter ID cards, so no political parties cared about them. Not only Dhangar, there are many other nomadic tribes that don't have houses, lands, and another such facility like voter ID cards and cards.

Author: What role should the government play for Dhangars?

Interviewee 3: The government can work, but there is no leadership among Dhangars. Even after the second largest population, Maharashtra, they are marginalized. Other communities like Mali, banazara, and Teli have some powerful leaders for their representation, but Dhangar does not have such leaders.

Author: What is the impact of urbanization and industrialization on the Dhangar community?

Interviewee 3: We can't stop urbanization. Dhangar should adapt themselves to present change.

Author: What kind of culture do Dhangars have?

Interviewee 3: They had their own deity, festival, custom, playing instruments, and folk songs. They form songs and dance while moving from one place to another.

Author: Does Dhangar culture get any preservation provisions from anyone?

Interviewee 3: No, politicians didn't care about their preservation or culture.

Author: Does there is any significant change in the Dhangar community due to the efforts of different NGOs

Interviewee 3: No. In my view, no NGO is working seriously for Dhangars. There are many big organizations working for other tribes, but there is not any such organization working for Dhangars.

Author: What are your policy recommendations?

Interviewee 3: They should get land for a home in the village. There should be educational provisions for Dhangars. It is very costly to domesticate sheep and goats. Dhangars should change their occupation and should start living in villages so their conditions improve and they get basic facilities in villages.

Author: What are the contributions of Dhangars in the history of Maharashtra?

Interviewee 3: The commanders of the Maratha empire were Holkars (Dhangars) and Jaswant Rao, who united the whole of Maharashtra. They safeguard India from invaders. Ahaliya bai Holkar reconstructed many temples that had been destroyed by invaders.

