



GOND TRIBAL COMMUNITY IN MAHARASHTRA – A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Gonds are one of the major tribal communities living in Maharashtra. The Gonds are among the largest tribal groups in South Asia and perhaps the world. The term Gond refers to tribal peoples who live all over India's Deccan Peninsula. Most describe themselves as the people living in the hill area (Gond) or as Koi or Koitur.

Scholars believe Gonds settled in Gondwana, now known as eastern Madhya Pradesh, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries AD. Muslim writers describe a rise of Gond states after the fourteenth century. Gond dynasties ruled in four kingdoms (Garha-Mandla, Deogarh, Chanda, and Kherla) in central India between the sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries.

Maratha power swept into Gond land in the 1740s. They overthrew Gondrajas (princes) and seized most of their territory. Some Gond zamindaris (estates) survived until recently. However, Gonds are similar to many tribal groups today in that they face severe economic hardships. Although some Gond groups own a great deal of land, others are classified as Scheduled Tribes, which means they need special social and economic help.

Gonds live all over central India, and in the states of Maharashtra and Orissa. As "hill people," they traditionally have been associated with hills and uplands in the Deccan Peninsula. Many Gonds live around the Satpura Hills, Maikala Range and Son-Deogarh uplands, and on the Bastar plateau. Many Gond tribes also live in the Garhjat Hills of northern Orissa. The upland areas generally lie between 2,000 to 3,000 feet (600 to 900 meters), with isolated peaks occasionally exceeding approximately 4,000 feet (1,200 meters). The region is drained by the head-waters of many of India's major rivers (such as the Narmada, Tapti, Son, Mahanadi, and Godavari). Forest cover is dense in places, and communications are generally difficult. February sees the start of the hot season, with temperatures rising to over 40° C (104° F) in early June. The summer brings the monsoon rains, with precipitation amounts varying from 47 inches (120 centimeters) to over 63 inches (160 centimeters) in the more southeasterly locations. Late September marks the return of the cool, dry weather of winter. Recently in Maharashtra a university is established by name Gondwana University, Gadchiroli district.

Language: Gondi belongs to the Dravidian family of languages and is related to Tamil and Kannada. The language offers a cultural connection between the many Gond groups. Many Gonds also speak Hindi, Marathi, or Telegu.

Folklore

Hereditary bards and professional storytellers called Pardhans tell stories about Gond legends and myths. This makes for a rich oral tradition. In these stories, it is said that when Gond gods were born, their mother abandoned them. The goddess Parvati rescued them, but her consort Sri Shambhu Mahadeo (Shiva) kept them captive in a cave. Pahandi Kapar Lingal, a Gond hero, who received help from the goddess Jangu Bai, rescued them from the cave. They came out of the cave in four groups, thus laying the foundations of the basic fourfold division of Gond society. Lingal also is responsible for creating a Gond kinship system and establishing a group of great Gond gods.

Religion

Persa Pen is the most distinctive feature of Gond religion. Like many other tribes, Gonds worship a high god known as Baradeo, whose alternate names are Bhagavan, Sri Shambu Mahadeo, and Persa Pen. Baradeo oversees activities of lesser gods. He is respected but he does not receive fervent devotion, which is shown only to clan deities. Each Gond clan has its Persa Pen, who protects all clan members. The Persa Pen is essentially good but can be dangerous and violent. Many Gonds believe that when a Pardhan (bard) plays his fiddle, the deity's fierce powers can be controlled.

Each village has its Village-Guardian and Village-Mother who are worshipped when villagers celebrate regular festivities. Gonds also worship family and household gods, gods of the field, and gods of cattle. Deities such as Shitala Mata, goddess of smallpox, help ward off disease. Spirits are also believed to inhabit hills, rivers, lakes and trees.

Village priests (devari), perform sacrifices and rituals for village festivals. The head of a household typically carries out family ceremonies. Clan priests (katora) tend the shrine and ritual objects of the clan's Persa Pen. These priests also guard the sacred spear point and organize annual festivals.



Most aspects of Gond life, from the greatest festivals to the building of a new cattle shed, are accompanied by sacrifice. Certain deities, especially female ones, demand chickens, goats, and sometimes male buffaloes. Every nine or twelve years, Gonds sacrifice a pig to the god Narayan Deo in an important ceremony known as the Laru Kaj (Pig's Wedding). Other rituals also involve offerings of fruits, coconuts, flowers, colored powder, and strings.

Gonds believe evil spirits and the gods' displeasure cause most diseases and misfortunes. They ask soothsayers and diviners to find out the cause of problems and to suggest remedies. Sometimes, magicians and shamans (healers) can provide this advice. Magicians use special formulas to control the actions of a deity or spirit that is causing a particular affliction. Shamans fall into a trance and give voice to the demands of an offended god or spirit.

Festivals of Gond

Many Gond festivals are connected to agriculture. Pola, a cattle festival, and Nagpanchami, the snake festival, are very popular.

Dasahara is an important Gond holiday. A Gond custom is stick dancing undertaken by young people. Bands of young people travel from village to village, dancing and singing. The dancing is a religious duty. It is also an occasion for fun.

Living Patterns of Gonds

Each Gond village has a headman (known by local names such as mukhia, mahji, or patel) and a village council (panchayat) chosen by the villagers. The council consists of the headman, priest, village watchman, and four or five elders. It helps keep the village running smoothly and upholds Gond customs. Villages also have service castes such as Ahir (cowherds), Agaria (blacksmiths), Dhulia (drummers), and Pardhan (bards and singers). A typical Gond village has several hamlets. Each consists of homesteads that house extended families. Houses are usually built of mud and thatch. They consist of a living room, kitchen, veranda, a special room for women to use while menstruating, and a shrine for clan gods.

Gond houses contain cots and a few wooden stools; mats are used for sitting and sleeping.

Social and Family Life

Gond society is divided into four groups known as phatries or sagas in Gondi. Each saga traces its descent to one of the four groups of gods who emerged from the cave after their release by the hero Lingal. The saga is divided into several clans (pari). A clan consists of a group of people who believe they share a common ancestor. Generally, it is good to marry outside the clan.

Kinship and marriage customs among Gonds reflect broader regional patterns. The norm is cross-cousin marriage (for example, marrying one's mother's brother's daughter), which is typical in southern India. Gond groups that have been influenced by northern peoples such as Marathas, however, follow northern customs in determining marriage partners. Similarly, northern Gonds allow widows to remarry a brother of the deceased husband. Gonds typically choose their marriage mates, and a tribal council approves the matches. The father of a groom pays a bride price. Gond weddings include many significant ceremonies. The main part of the wedding occurs when the bride and groom walk seven times around a wedding post. Newlyweds live with the groom's family until it is possible for them to move into a house of their own.

Sometimes, Gond matches are made when a groom and bride elope. These marriages must be approved later by relatives and the village council. The council also can approve divorces.

Gond men typically wear the dhoti, or loin cloth. The dhoti is a long piece of white cotton cloth wrapped around the waist and then drawn between the legs and tucked into the waist. Women wear a cotton sari (a length of fabric wrapped around the waist, with one end thrown over the right shoulder) and choli (tight-fitting, cropped blouse).

The staples of the Gond diet are two millets known as kodo and kutki. These are either boiled to a broth or cooked to a dry cereal. Broth is preferred for the first two meals of the day and the dry cereal is eaten at night, often with vegetables. Vegetables are either grown in gardens or collected from forests along with roots and tubers. Honey is also gathered from forests.

Rice is a luxury item that Gonds enjoy during feasts and festivals. Most Gonds like meat. Animals sacrificed at ceremonies are eagerly consumed, and animals hunted in the forest supplement the diet. Gonds must abstain from the flesh of animals that are their clan totems. Gonds grow tobacco for smoking and for celebrations make liquor from the mahua tree.



Literacy (percentage of the population who can read and write) among Gonds varies from just over 25 percent in Maharashtra to less than 15 percent in Madhya Pradesh. Among females in Madhya Pradesh, it drops to about 4 percent. Few children attend school regularly, and girls rarely continue past primary school.

Cultural Beliefs and Life among Gonds

Gonds protect pregnant women against spells and evil influences, and perform several rituals after a baby is born. A mother's brother generally names a baby boy, while the father's sister names a girl. Children grow up as part of a family, clan, and phratry (one of the four main divisions of Gond society), and gradually learn the ways of their people. Both boys and girls help guard family crops from birds and monkeys. Males undergo a ritual shaving of the beard, mustache, and eyebrows as a sign of adulthood. Girls are considered full-grown at their first menstruation.

Gonds cremate or bury their dead. Children, unmarried persons, and individuals dying an inauspicious death (for instance, in an epidemic) are buried without much ceremony. Gonds believe humans have a life force and a spirit. On death, the life force is reincarnated into another earthly existence, but the spirit remains in the other world. Gonds perform death rituals to help the spirit move into the other world and to ease its acceptance by other clan spirits. This rite, known as *askarun*, must be done to fulfill an obligation to the deceased. Memorial pillars honor the dead. Gonds believe ancestral spirits watch over the living, punish offenders, and guard Gond communities.

Gonds welcome visitors with dried tobacco leaves, fruits, or other small gifts. Many villages have guest huts. Gonds celebrate most festive occasions with song and dance. In some instances, such as with the Dandari dancers, dances retell events from Gond mythology. At other times, dances are performed simply for fun. Dhulia are a professional musician caste and Pardhans (bards) preserve legends, myths, and history, passing these traditions on from generation to generation. Gonds also enjoy assembling on full-moon nights to sing and dance. Cockfighting is a favorite pastime. Both men and women enjoy wearing heavy silver ornaments. Women also like to wear colored glass bangles and marriage necklaces made of small black beads. They often tattoo their bodies.

Gonds today are mainly farmers. Although some Gond communities have risen to the status of landowners, many are landless laborers. No sporting activities are associated with traditional Gond society. Gonds enjoy singing and dancing. Some also enjoy cock-fighting (battle between two roosters, with spectators placing bets on the outcome). Gonds have a rich arts tradition that includes pottery, basket making, body tattooing, and floor painting. They paint designs in red and black on the walls of their houses. These drawings often celebrate festivals and depict animals, birds, human figures, hunting, and dancing. Gonds make musical instruments. They carve memorial pillars in wood and stone for their dead. They often decorate houses with carved doors and panels.

Social Problems

Gonds face problems typical of tribal peoples throughout South Asia and much of the world. They suffer exploitation and discrimination, and often are forced to live on less productive lands in remote areas. They are experiencing increasing pressure on their land, a rise in the number of landless laborers, and high levels of poverty. Lack of education and low levels of literacy further reduce economic opportunity.

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