
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION:

Sindhudurga, a District in the Konkan region of the State of Maharashtra, has been gifted with a coastline 121 kilometres long. The District itself stretches from 73°19' to 74°13' East Longitudes and from 15°37' to 16°40' North latitudes. It is bounded by the Arabian Sea on the West, Sahyadri Mountain Ranges on the East, Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra State on the North and by the State of Goa on the South.

Human habitation, for its survival, is dependent on the surrounding geographical environment. The economy of the region, as well as its inhabitants' style of living, are also determined by the geographical environment. The long coastline of the Sindhudurg District has dictated that the economic activities of the majority of the population of the region be based on the activities related to the sea, such as sea-faring, shallow- and deep-sea fishing, etc. In other words, many communities in the District rely on 'fishing' as their whole-time occupation as the main economic activity. The "Gabit" is one such community that is traditionally engaged in fishing on the coastline of the Sindhudurg District.

1.2 ORIGIN OF 'GABITS':

P.K.Gode has rendered certain information about the origin of the term 'Gabit'. He claims to have come across the reference to 'Gabit' in a bundle of papers designated as 'Salshi Daftar' that was made available to him for reference purposes by the Bharatiya Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal, in which the term had been used not less than three times. He postulates that the word 'Gabit' comes from the Arabic word 'Ghorab' (meaning 'to grab' or 'to catch'). Through the adaptation of the original Arabic word, first into Marathi and later on, into Konkani languages, its pronunciation degenerated into 'Gabit' and the word came to signify a community of people that caught the fish.¹

'Bharatiya Sanskriti Kosh' contains the following, though scant, information about the Gabit community. The Gabits originally were Marathas serving in the naval force of Chhatrapati Shivaji. The naval armada at that time consisted of small-sized arks (Taru) and large-sized warships (Grabs). The Grabs were fitted with medium-calibre naval guns. The Grabs were operated by Konkani Marathas who were called 'Grabitis'. During the course of time, the word 'Grabiti' degenerated into 'Gabit'. After the decline and fall of the Maratha Empire, the Grabitis had to earn their livelihood through some other occupation than manning the warships. Fishing on high seas was the occupation they chose.²

Molesworth, in his "Dictionary of Marathi and English" (2nd Edition, 1857), mentions 'Gabiti' and 'Gavati' as meaning 'Fisherman'. Two other words, 'Gabit' and 'Gawadi' mentioned by him also carry the same meaning.³

Two other works, "A Glossary of Indian Castes and Tribes" and "An Anthrographic Survey of India" (Calcutta, 1905) record 'Gabit' (or 'Gapit') as a tribe of fishermen from South Konkan region and that the Gabits found in Madras and Bombay are of the immigrant stock that originally came from Ratnagiri and Vengurla (two coastal townships that are prominent in sea-faring activities).⁴

The Supplement to the "Maharashtra Shabd Kosh" (1950) describes 'Gabiti' (or 'Gabit') as an adventurous sea-faring community in Maharashtra.⁵

In the "Ethnographical Survey of Bombay" (1906), 'Monograph Number 33' titled as "Caste Gabit - Ratnagiri and Kanara Districts and Sawantwadi State", a mention of the 'Gabits' is found and it is further recorded that they call themselves Konkani Marathas and used to man the navy of Shivaji, the Maratha King. On the conquest of the Peshwas by the British and the subsequent disbanding of the Maratha Navy, the Gabits took to fishing which isolated them from the main Maratha streams. Prior to the establishment of the British supremacy at sea in 1760, and to a lesser extent

until 1800 when the creek backwaters passed under British control, the Gabits caused serious losses through piracy. They are now chiefly fishermen and sailors. It is further revealed from this Monograph that the original home of the Gabits is the territory of Goa, where they are known as 'Kharvis' and that during the Portuguese invasion of the area, they fled to the coasts of Ratnagiri and Kanara districts and settled there. Those who remained in Goa were converted to Christianity.⁶

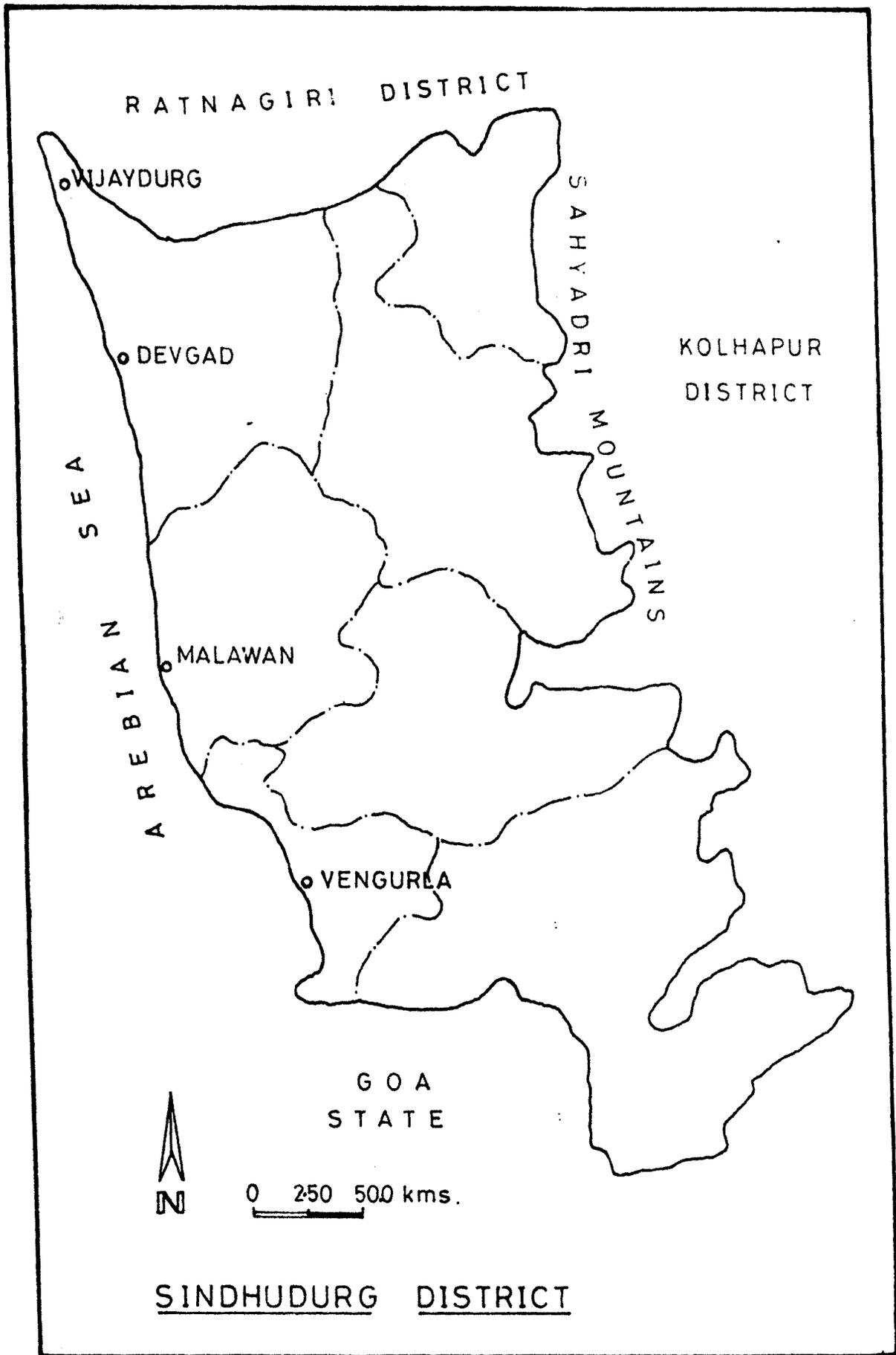
These immigrants opted for fishing as their occupation. The places this community chose to live lacked transport and communication facilities. Non-existence of market places for selling the fish caught resulted into the decline of their income and made the whole community impoverished and helpless, which at one time, was at the height of its naval tradition and greatness.

1.3 THE GABITS IN SINDHUDURG DISTRICT:

The history of the Gabits in the Sindhudurg district really begins with the period of Shivaji, the Great. It was the vision of this Maratha King that he undertook the development of the coastal region from the military angle and established a Maratha Naval Force there. His warships employed men to pull the oars and to raise or lower the sails.

The Maratha Chiefs employed by King Shivaji in his newly established navy probably did not have any sea-faring knowledge at first, but later on, distinguished themselves and came to be known as 'Sarang', 'Tandel', and 'Mheter', which titles are, to this day, found as surnames among the Gabits and also for which, some of the families have still in their possession the original 'Sanads' bestowing these titles on their forefathers.

At present, Gabits are concentrated more in their numbers in places like Vengurla, Malwan, Deogad and Vijaydurg. They follow fishing as their occupation. The historical records show that as Shivaji built his forts on the western coast of Ratnagiri district, he protected these forts through a fleet consisting of Grabs. Such fleets were stationed at Malwan and Vijaydurg for the protection of Sindhudurg and Vijaydurg forts, respectively. As the men employed on these Grabs had to live on sea most of the time, they kept their families either within the forts or just outside. The Princely Ruler of Sawantwadi also had a few Grabs in his possession, which he employed for the protection of the ports of Aronda, Vengurla and Nilwati. In a paper read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay on 26.2.1919, a Mr.Cadell refers to the piracy that was being carried on by the naval fleet belonging to the Second Khem-Sawant of Sawantwadi who had many Grabs with him. In 1763, this fleet of Grabs caused such a terrible havoc that the English had to put a stop to it by capturing



RATNAGIRI DISTRICT

WJAYDURG

DEVGAD

SAHYADRI MOUNTAINS

KOLHAPUR DISTRICT

ARABIAN SEA

MALAWAN

VENGURLA

GOA STATE



0 250 500 kms.

SINDHUDURG DISTRICT

the fort of Rairi in 1765. The piracy began again in 1803 with renewed force and continued till 1812, in which year, the Maratha Navy was brought under complete control of the British. Still, stray raids at sea continued until a treaty was concluded between the Raja of Sawantwadi and the British in 1834.

As Gabits are found residing on the southern coast of Ratnagiri district and Sawantwadi State, it is obvious that they selected their places of abode where Grabs were operating. Gabits are found in Sawantwadi State since the ports within the State were protected by the Grabs and on the sea-coasts of Vengurla, Malwan and Deogad talukas as Grabs were operating in those waters as muscles of the Maratha Navy.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Gabits are of the original Maratha stock employed by Chhatrapati Shivaji in his navy. With the abolition of the Maratha Navy, the Gabits had to switch to fishing as their main occupation and have been following it for last two hundred years or so.

The area populated by the Gabits at present lies in the Sindhudurg revenue district of Maharashtra State.

1.4 A PROFILE OF FISHING AT SEA:

Fishing and hunting have existed side-by-side since

ancient times. In the pre-historic period, fishing was limited only to satisfy the basic need of food. In modern times, however, the business of fishing has attained special importance because of the commercial principles applied to it. In order to understand the importance of fishing business, it is necessary to understand what fishing is!

In simplest terms, fishing means catching of fish for the purpose of food or trade. Fishing, as a business activity, means catching the fish to satisfy the market needs.

If in old days, fish were caught for the purpose of daily food, today the fishing business has gained international importance from the commercial point of view. With the advent of technology, fish and fish products are now used in the manufacture of edible oils, paints, fertilizers, medicines, soaps and cosmetics. The newly acquired importance of fishing has helped the economic prosperity of coastal nations like Japan, Korea and Malaysia. In other coastal countries also, fishing constitutes an important commercial and economic activity. Today, the fish-catch on global basis is more than 650 lakh tonnes annually; of which, 150 lakh tonnes are used in the production of oils and other products. The rest is consumed as food.

Fishing is typefied on the basis of its nature. The first type of fishing is conducted in freshwater, i.e. away from the sea, and especially in the rivers, lakes and

tanks. The fish caught in these waters are sold in the nearby market places directly for human consumption. Though this type of fishing is in its primary stage, it has its own importance. Moreover, recently, there has been a considerable improvement in the technique and yield in this type of fishing. In addition, in certain places, fish farming has become developed considerably, where controlled fish-breeding and other activities are carried out on a large scale. Basins of big rivers like Ganga, Yamuna and Godavari are most suitable for this purpose.

The second type of fishing is carried out on the sea and in the creeks and hence, it is called 'saltwater fishing'. Saltwater fishing has a considerable potential for development and where modern technology is put to maximum use. Mechanization in this type of fishing improves the quality, quantity and the variety of the fish caught. A sub-type of saltwater fishing is called 'fully mechanized fishing' and is sometimes further classified on the basis of the areas where it is carried on, such as North-west Atlantic fishing or North-east Pacific fishing. Sea-fishing is also classified on the basis of the purpose for which it is carried out, such as commercial fishing or private fishing.

Fishing methods have undergone a considerable evolution during the course of time. Traditionally, fish is caught one at a time with the help of a fishing rod and tackle. In this method, at the end of a strong line, a U-shaped

hook is attached which is covered with a small bait for the fish to bite. The fish swallows the bait and gets hooked. The line is then slowly wound in and the fish taken out of water.

Another method is to use nets. These nets come in different varieties for different purposes like gillnetting, trawling and purse-netting. In trawling, the nets are leaded down with weights and trawled across the sea floor. Only the fish smaller than the size of the net webbing escapes, rest everything is hauled up through an arrangement of winches and pulleys to the trawler-boat's decks. Uneatables like jellyfish, sea cucumber and refuse are thrown overboard and the catch sorted according to its variety. Prized varieties like king prawns, shrimp, tuna and sardine go to factory ships or to on-shore processing plants, exportable varieties to the cold storage and the remaining to the nearest local fish market. In purse-netting, small, webbed, purses are used; thus small fry and unwanted varieties of fish are not brought up.

At present, mechanized fishing has gained popularity because of bigger catch size, fast turnaround time (i.e. the time between completing a catch on high seas, delivering it on shore and returning for a fresh catch). Old wooden hull boats have given way to metal- or fibre-glass hull boats that are light in dead-weight and thus can carry more fish back

to the shore. Although the initial investment in these boats is rather heavy, it can be recouped with savings in maintenance, increased production volume and longer operating life.

In fishing business also, there are primary and secondary equipment and materials; boat, nets, oars, balancing sticks, fish bags and baskets, are the primary materials; while the secondary items are cold storage, chilling boxes, transport vehicles, inflatable rubber tubes, etc.

The simplicity of the occupation lies only on the surface, as it is full of dangers and the fishermen have to face many calamities. Many of these calamities are the natural phenomena, like sudden weather-changes, strong winds, heavy rains, storms, etc., which cannot be forecast with precision. In order to face and overcome these, people in this occupation have to be adventurous by nature. Knowledge of swimming is a question of survival or death for the fishermen. Sometimes, their fishing boats are struck by big fish like whales; at other times, boats scrape against rocks hidden underwater; quite often, shallow-bottomed boats capsize because of high lifting waves. Every year, just prior to monsoons when squalls are raging out on high seas, newspapers are full of the reports of the fishermen gone missing. Hence, fishermen prefer to go out to the sea in groups and carry with them inflatable rubber tubes. In a way, fishing is the most uncertain and insecure occupation. It has more ups and downs than

other businesses. Furthermore, bringing the fish to the market before it starts putrefying is the prime condition. Changes in the weather have worst effect on the fish and hence, profits and losses in this business fluctuate widely.

There is a lot of difference between the traditional and the modern types of fishing. In this part, fishing was mostly carried on with the intention of earning a livelihood. but now it is done largely on commercial basis. The business cannot be kept limited to the domestic market alone, since fish and fish products have much demand in the international market also. In this area, traditional equipment used to be mostly employed for fishing, which caused higher expenditure and required more manpower, but now with the use of the modern equipment, fishermen can go well out in the sea and catch more fish in less time. Because of launches and cold storage facilities and improved transportation, fishermen now can do more business with less expenditure and less manual labour.

Sindhudurg district has a coastline of 121 kilometres. Together with its 18 creeks, it offers an area of 16,000 sq.kms. for fishing; out of which, only 6,000 sq.kms. area is now used presently for fishing. The volume of fish catch from this area is gradually increasing over the years. According to the recent statistics available, fish weighing 800 metric tonnes valued at Rs.10.0 crores was exported out of this area. When

the cascading effects of this activity on other businesses are considered, it becomes clear that fishing plays a very major role in the region's economy.

The fishing community of Gabits depends mostly on fishing for earning its livelihood. These people live very near to the sea and their religious ideas are woven around the sea. They worship sea and make offerings of coconut to it with much devotion and pray it to be calm and safe for their fishing sojourns.

REFERENCES

1. Gode, P.K., "Caste-Name 'Gabit'", In: 'Sardesai Commemorative Volume', (Ed: Tikekar, S.R.), quoted by: Kubal, Ramesh, In: 'Gabit Kshatriya Armari Gharanyancha Itihas', p.31.
2. Quoted by: Kubal, Ramesh, op.cit., p.29.
3. Op.cit.
4. Op.cit., p.26.
5. Op.cit., p.35.
6. Op.cit., p.46.