

India

The free men of the Satpuras

Korkus have lived in these ranges for times immemorial.

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[Rushikesh Gawade](#) | December 27, 2018



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The stretches of Satpura hills along the Maharashtra - Madhya Pradesh border, particularly those in Amravati district of Maharashtra are popularly known as Melghat. Geologically, Satpura hills are among the oldest landforms formed on the Indian land. Having gone through weathering and erosion by the natural forces of water flow and wind for millions of years, the hills here do not touch the sky like the comparatively younger mountains of Himalayas, but still they retain their impressive altitudes. The gentle and vast slopes of the hills are covered by a semi dense forest, dominated by deciduous Teak trees. The region is drained by river Tapi and its small tributaries. Melghat has a significant population of tigers so the region was declared to be a Tiger Reserve in 1973.

The traditional inhabitants of these hills are the Korkus. Korku is an adivasi tribe and these people have been living in this region for time immemorial. A small population of the Gond

tribe is also present here, but the majority of the population (around 90 percent) in Melghat belongs to the Korku tribe. Korkus are designated as a Scheduled Tribe by the government.

Korkus have developed their own way of life largely away from the self proclaimed 'mainstream' of the society. The tough topography of this region and lack of communication facilities kept these cultures comparatively isolated from the outside world for a long time.

Almost every aspect of their lives is connected with the forests they live in. Until few years ago, almost all the resources they use in their everyday life, from the roof under which they live to the musical instruments they play, would come from only one source, the forests around them. Almost everything needed was produced locally by the villagers using their own skills. Korkus have developed their own style of building houses convenient to the weather and topography of their region. After independence and coming of the modern means of communication and transport, the interaction of Korkus with the 'outside world' has increased.



Meeting with 'development'

Until the reorganisation of states happened in 1956, the Melghat region was a part of Central Provinces and Berar (CP & Berar) administrative region. At the time of reorganisation, it was decided that the region should be made a part of the undivided state of Maharashtra and Gujarat to fulfill the need of timber of the state, considering the Teak forests in the region. In words of Dr. Ravindra Kolhe, who has been working for the adivasis in this region for around thirty years, "In the initial years, after reorganisation of states, this region was a centre of attraction

for the government because the Teak forests here were a big potential resources of timber. But later, when the environmental concerns gained importance, cutting of Teak for commercial use was prohibited. Government understood that it cannot appropriate the resources in this region so the development concerns of this region also got ignored. Melghat again became a subject of ignorance."

For many years after the independence, no modern health facilities were made available in this region. Child mortality rate and maternal mortality rate here were among the highest in the country. Many children would die of diarrhoea. In such a situation, Dr. Ravindra Kolhe, who had completed his Doctorate in 1989, decided to work in this region which was deprived of the very basic medicinal facilities. He began his practice in a village called Bairagad in Dharni tehsil of Amravati . "To reach Bairagad, one had to walk 40 km then because no means of transportation was available" says Dr. Kolhe who has been living in Bairagad since then. He had to become a one stop solution for the Korku people in this region, performing almost every kind of medical work with almost zero consultation charges! Today, modern medical facilities are gradually growing in this region and some means of transportation have also become available.

In a village called Bod in Dharni taluka, one can see walls of the building of school painted with the slogans informing people about Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996. The act provides protection to the traditional rights of local people over the forest products and forest land. It also empowers the local panchayat to protect local culture. But I found almost no one in the village who was even aware of this law. Naturally, there are many holes in the actual implementation of PESA in this region.

I saw that toilets were constructed outside every house under a scheme of the government. But when I enquired with the villagers, I got to know that, only the structure was constructed without any thought of water inside the toilet. The septic tanks were too shallow and open. The villagers had no option but put the constructed structure to some other use. Many government schemes in Melghat are implemented half heartedly like this due to which, they fail to contribute in any way in the improvement of the lives of these people.

Education and the problem of language

Korku students are faced with a complicated problem of language. The mother tongue of these students is Korku, that's the language they speak at home. But as the region today comes in Maharashtra, the medium of instruction in the schools is Marathi. Many teachers do not know Korku, they only know Marathi and some know Hindi.

As the region earlier was a part of Hindi speaking CP & Berar province, Korku people are more familiar with Hindi than Marathi. But as the medium of instruction is Marathi, the student now learn from the teachers in Hindi, and have to reproduce it in exam in Marathi.

Hrishikesh Sopan Khilare, a psychology scholar, who has been working in Melghat since two years says, "Korku students have to cross a barrier of language to comprehend what is being taught to them. This fact has made learning difficult for them and it has created a cognitive

backlog among the Korku students. We teach the students that 'अ' is for 'अननस' (Pineapple in Marathi), but as they have never seen a pineapple, how will they understand it? "

Hrishikesh is working on Korku language and is trying to develop a script for Korku. He says that it will help in giving orientations of Korku language to the Marathi speaking teachers.

When Indie Journal asked about this issue to Lomesh Salame, joint commissioner for education of Tribal Development Commissionerate, Maharashtra, he said that, under the PESA act, it has been made compulsory that all the teachers appointed in a PESA territory should be the residents of that PESA territory only. So, these teachers will be familiar with the local language. This will help in improving the connect between teachers and the students. He also said that the tribal development commission is in the process of recruiting a larger number of teachers in accordance with the PESA rules in near future.

Dr. Kolhe, speaking about this issue said, "if the medium of instruction in this region is made Hindi instead of Marathi, it will become more easy for the students to understand the curriculum."

Local culture interacting with globalisation

In their history of near isolation, Korkus have developed their own unique culture here. Korku houses are constructed in straight rows having a line of open drainage system in front of them. The interior of the house is decorated with locally made colours and artistic shapes inscribed on the walls. This work is usually done by the elder woman of the family. The use of wood in the construction of houses is significant. But nowadays, homes built using cement concrete are gradually becoming a part of the village landscape. Television sets and mobile phones are also becoming a part of everyday Korku lives but getting a stable network for mobile phone is a matter of luck yet.

In Korku culture, women are more empowered. The dowry system is reversed here. The boy's family has to pay a fixed amount of money to the father of the girl he wishes to marry. The amount is fixed by the village panchayat. In Bod, the amount was fixed at Rs. 10, 000.

Love marriages are not treated with taboo, but the boy have to pay more money (Around Rs. 15, 000 in Bod) if the father of his girlfriend is against their marriage! If the woman is not happy with the man he marries after marriage, she can come back to her home and live there forever. Such women also have the option to marry someone else. Women are making good use of the education facilities which are being developed there. Some girls in Bod have completed their studies up to 12th standard but very few of them get the opportunity to complete graduation, unavailability of a college nearby being one of the reasons.

Religion wise, Korkus are practitioners of Hinduism. There were small temples of deities like Ganesha and Maruti outside the village. But interestingly, a temple was also built for a local deity, Jaitubaba. Jaitubaba, a Korku man of that village remained unmarried and led a simple life there. Villagers respected him for his simplicity and philosophical talks. When he died around 12 years ago, the temple was built in the memory of him. Today, Jaitubaba is revered

in the same way like other Hindu deities. On the other hand, plastic images of Hindu gods from the markets are also becoming a part of Korku homes.



Livelihood changes and dealing with 'money'

Melghat was traditionally known as 'Gavalan Gaaicha Pradesh' (region of cows). Rearing cattle was the main occupation of Korkus. The jungles in Melghat served as an excellent pasture for the cattle. Collecting minor produces from the forests used to fulfill much of the daily needs of Korkus. Agriculture also was a part of Korku life but it was secondary. In the last few decades though, the professional structure of Korkus has gone through a transition.

"With increasing population, the number of cattle owned by a Korku has decreased. Milk produced per cow in this region is very low in comparison to other regions as the breeds of cows are not modified. In fact the main output from the cows today is the cow dung which is used as the only fertilizer in the farms and the bulls which are important for cultivating the land," says Hrishikesh.

Korkus are gradually moving towards agriculture. Cotton, Tur and Soybean are the important crops taken here. But much of the region comes under the buffer zone of the Melghat tiger reserve, so limited human activity is permitted there. Land development is very minimal in the buffer zone of the reserve. Crops are taken in the small patches on the slopes of the hills.

A few decades back, money was a new thing for ordinary Korkus. There were almost no ways of earning money as the contact with the outside world was also very minimal. The increasing interaction with the mainstream world made it necessary for them to earn money. Many Korkus began to work as labourers on the farms of non tribal people of Melghat for earning money.



Sonsingh Kasdekar, a Korku young man, who has studied up to 12th, said, " Hum Korku mast life jeete hai (We Korkus live a joyous life). Yes, we don't have so much money, but we don't really need so much money. I work everyday on daily wages, whatever money I earn is sufficient to fulfill daily needs of my family. Worrying for the future is not in our nature like you people. We celebrate life everyday with whatever we have today."

Sonsingh has worked for a private company in Pune for a while. He left the job after getting married and moved to his own village. In spite of having experienced the modern life in a metro city, he was proud of his own way of life in the Melghat. He has chosen to fight the struggles of their own life over leading a rather alienated life in the city. We called him Santosh, symbolically, for our convenience, we were trying to change 'Sonsingh' the tribal to a more familiar 'Santosh'. He too had no problem in speaking with us as Santosh but had chosen to remain Sonsingh at heart.