

# Chapter 4

## Livelihoods and Development: Socioeconomic Exclusion in Mumbai's Hinterland

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### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between development policy and the social lives and livelihoods of marginalized peri-urban and rural peoples.<sup>1</sup> As is widely acknowledged in recent development studies literature, development policy cannot continue to assume that people are simply subjects of development. Instead, there is a need to understand the interrelationship between local perceptions and beliefs, transaction costs, and the development of institutions capable of ensuring social order and facilitating development (North 1990, 2005). This chapter is an illustration of what happens when these matrices are not addressed.

In the state of Maharashtra, as in India more widely today, tribal communities<sup>2</sup> are located at the intersection of a traditional, forest-based way of life and the competing needs of the agents of development and modernization: industrial and

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<sup>2</sup> The aboriginal peoples of India are known as *adivasi* or tribals. These communities are typically the most economically, socially, and geographically marginalized sections of society and are seldom integrated fully into caste-based Hindu society. The term, "tribals," is used widely as shorthand for "tribal communities" or "tribal peoples" in both popular and official discourse in India. We have followed that practice here.

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commercial lobbies that make alternative claims to the land and water on which these tribals survive. This study is an attempt to learn more about the lives of the tribals whose livelihoods are under threat. Specifically, it is concerned with learning more about how tribal life has been transformed in the past century, as their ability to access and survive on forest resources has been undermined and as they are forced to enter the cash economy. In this way, it is suggested that discourses of conservation and protection marginalize tribals without achieving the desired objective of protecting important ecological resources.

This chapter is based on a 3-year documentation of tribal lives, including extensive oral interviews that tease out family histories and an extensive cross-seasonal survey looking at consumption patterns; social networks; impact on the forest; beliefs and attitudes toward medicine, religion and witchcraft, among others; and hopes and dreams for the future.

## 4.2 Mumbai and Its Hinterland: Land, Water, and Forest

The history of Mumbai is a history of conflict and struggle over two critical and equally scarce resources: land and water. Successive indigenous and colonial governments have sought to expand the land base through a combination of land reclamation—sewing together seven previously disparate islands—and the expansion of the original island city into the hinterland. The colonial government's interest in the commercial and industrial potential of Mumbai played a major role in determining not only its growth but also the nature and type of growth. The rapid industrial growth initiated by the cotton boom, the establishment of the cotton textile mills, the long-distance maritime export trade in cotton and cotton-piece goods through a flourishing shipping industry, and the establishment of a network of railways for enabling trading activities<sup>3</sup> all demanded more resources like water, timber, and food grains from the hinterland. The nearby Thane district with abundant dense forest contained an abundance of expensive trees such as teak, rosewood, and sal, which catered to the ever-increasing urban demand for commercial and domestic purposes. The colonial government was well aware of the natural wealth of Thane and its demand in Mumbai, and this resulted in deliberate and systematic formulation of forest laws.

This trend continues today, as industrialists, merchants, bankers, farmers, and the construction industry compete with a rapidly expanding population for access to and control over both land and water. Soaring property values contribute enormously to the growth of the middle class in Mumbai, the most populous of Indian cities. While this brings prosperity to some—mostly the upper caste Hindus—it places acute stress on marginal industries and most rural livelihoods. As the opportunity costs of land occupancy become apparent, less profitable sectors are displaced by residential and industrial property developments. The closure of the cotton mills over the past two decades, in particular, has given huge impetus to this, as has the

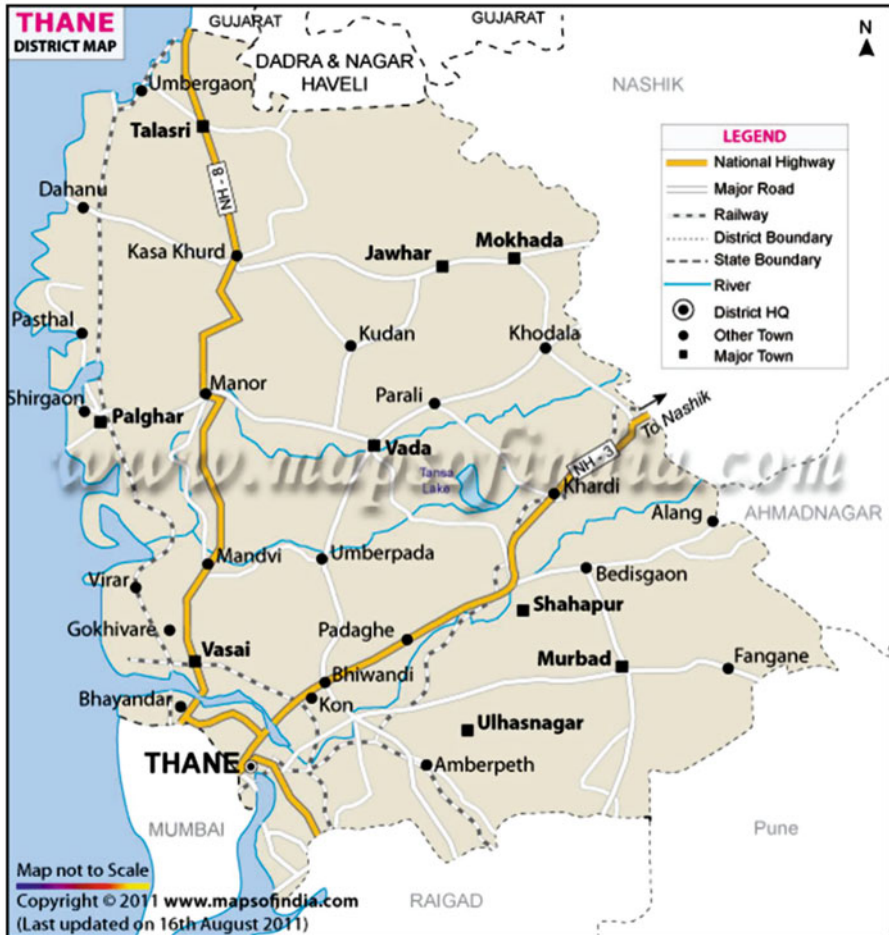
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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the first railway line in India was laid between Mumbai and Thane in 1853.

construction of special economic zones in the heart of Mumbai and the gentrification of residential neighborhoods.

Central to this symbiotic relationship between the construction of the “modern” and the incorporation of the “backward” hinterland is the never-ending search for water. As the colonial city expanded, the administrators of Mumbai were forced to search for additional sources of water in response to “an agitation by the island’s natives” over the drinking water problem in 1845, which prompted a search for water as far as 100 km inland (Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) 2006; Sule 2003, p. 1). The nineteenth century witnessed rapid industrial growth in Mumbai, which was accompanied by increasing population pressure. The ever-increasing population and flourishing trade put severe pressure on Mumbai’s scanty water supply. The docks, drainage, as well as domestic and manufacturing activities on the island also required steady water supply. Public and private wells and tanks were the sources of drinking water for the public. In the mid-nineteenth century, the years 1845, 1850, 1853, and 1855 received scanty rainfall, which alarmed the government. In 1848, iron pipes ordered from England were laid from Cooperage, storing 15,144 gal of water and serving the troops and the lunatic asylum in Colaba.

Captain J. H. G. Crawford proposed the Vihar valley water supply system to Mumbai in 1846. He proposed a bund on the Mithi River in Vihar, which would provide 100,000 gal of water per hour to Mumbai (Dossal 1991). The Crawford plan was, however, rejected on the ground of errors in computing cost. In response, William West, in 1851, submitted a moderate practical plan with the aim of supplying water to the city only during the 3 months of summer. The government was, however, keen on a more comprehensive solution. The superintendent of repairs of the Board of Conservancy then prepared a table of heights which indicated the most suitable means of conveying water from Vihar to the city. The city planners were convinced of the commercial potential of the city and, therefore, had no hesitation in developing infrastructure resources beyond city limits. The valley of origin of the river Mithi, located near the village Vihar, was chosen for impoundage. The work was completed in 1860. This was the first piped water supply scheme in Mumbai, and it supplied 32 million liters per day. In 1872, by increasing the height of the dam and adding additional pipes, the supply was increased to 68 million liters per day. Interestingly, the Vihar waterworks were initially met with strong resistance from the merchants of Mumbai, on the ground that it would increase taxation for the Indian community. Even the very necessity of such a project was questioned. It was evident that there was a strong colonial interest in creating a centralized urban system as a prerequisite to the control over resources. Gradually, the “success” of the Vihar water scheme, the vagaries of weather, and the increasing demand for water fuelled by development in the city led the colonial and, later, the postcolonial government to further construct dams and waterworks in rivers and valleys in the suburbs and in Thane district. To this end, a number of dams and lakes had been constructed, the most important being Vihar (on the Mithi River, completed in 1860), Tulsi (upstream of Vihar on the Mithi River, 1879), the Powai valley scheme on a tributary of the Mithi River (1892), the Tansa waterworks (built in four stages, 1892, 1915, 1925, 1948), the Modak Sagar on the lower Vaitarna River (1948–1957), the Ulhas River scheme (1967), and Bhatsa on the upper Vaitarna River (1972). The seventh dam on the middle



Map 4.1 Thane District and Mumbai, Maharashtra State

Vaitarna River is under construction, and several more schemes are in the pipeline given the enormous growth of Greater Mumbai in its northernmost suburbs (almost bordering Gujarat) and in Navi Mumbai in Thane and Raigad districts to the north and southeast (Map 4.1).

With the growth and development of Mumbai, the pressure on land and water in its suburbs and in Thane has increased manifold. In this way, the competing demands of modernity intersect with and overdetermine the lives of tribal and “backward” communities in Mumbai and its hinterland. This chapter examines the livelihoods of one such affected community, Aghai and its surrounding villages and hamlets, and considers the multiple impacts of Mumbai’s thirst for water and land on the tribal and backward communities that inhabit the areas surrounding the Tansa dam and wildlife sanctuary (Mondal 2004). Aghai falls under the Thane Municipal

Corporation (established in 1982) of the Konkan Division of Maharashtra. The nearest town to Aghai is Shahapur, with a population of 10,489 (2001 Census). Politically, the Aghai Gram Panchayat is part of the Dahanu Lok Sabha constituency in Thane district. The Tansa dam is located near Shahapur, about 100 km north of central Mumbai. Prior to independence, the dam was the main source of drinking water for Mumbai. At present, it provides well over a total of 494 million liters per day, which serves the needs of around 2 million citizens in Mumbai.

Large forest areas surround the Tansa dam. The most important part of these forest areas, both in terms of their value as a catchment area and their ecological significance, comprises the 216.75-km<sup>2</sup> Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary, which was proclaimed as a protected wildlife sanctuary under the Wildlife Preservation Act in 1970. Since then, attempts have been made to enhance the extent and quality of forest cover and to introduce new species of timber under schemes such as the general utility of timber scheme, the mixed plantation scheme, and the employment guarantee scheme. As a "notified sanctuary," the Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary falls under the administrative control of the Tansa Wildlife Division. The Tansa Lake falls outside the notified sanctuary area and is under the administrative control of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Council (BMC). Over 90% of the wildlife sanctuary is classified as "moist teak bearing," although the forest also contains economically valuable reserves of *khain*, *ain*, and *haldu*. In addition, the forest contains a number of rare and medicinally important plant species. At one point, the Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary contained a rich array of wildlife, including tiger, panther, sambar, cheetal, barking deer, wild boar, jackal, common langur, and bonnet macaque. Today, most of these have been poached, and the once pristine teak forests exhibit the signs of illegal deforestation and general neglect.

### 4.3 Forestry in India and the Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary

The protection and commercial exploitation of forests has always involved the forceful imposition of state control on the estimated 147 million people presently living within and often depending on India's vast forest areas. Communal land rights that have existed over centuries, but which have never been defined in legalistic or individualistic terms, are ignored as the state seeks to expand its hold over precious teak and other wood. In this way, the economy and social fabric of predominantly tribal settlements have been transformed irrevocably. Adapting Milward's (1947) classification, the management of Indian forests can be divided into roughly three delineated phases. Each of these phases is marked by an ongoing tension between what Weil (2006) usefully describes as the competing demands of "extraction" and "conservation." The balance between these contrasting impulses has never been resolved satisfactorily and continues to overdetermine the relationship between forest-dependent communities and the state in contemporary India.

The first phase began in the early nineteenth century. Motivated by a search for a reliable supply of timber for the Royal Navy, the British turned their attention to the so-called teak belt, which stretched along the Malabar Coast of Western India, covering

the Bombay and Madras Presidencies. In an effort to assert ownership rights, the British proclaimed teak a “royal tree” and, in 1806, formulated the first set of policies for the conservative exploitation of teak and other timbers required for ship building. The imposition of British rule in Bombay in the early nineteenth century marked the beginning of this process in Thane, as the colonial power’s hunger for water and land drove it northward out of the island city into the mainland. Its valuable forest resources and important waterways made Thane particularly attractive to the Bombay administration. In this way, the construction of the modern city would forever alter and transform the lives of tribals. Despite its origins in the search for timber, the first phase of Indian forestry was motivated by a sincere attempt to conserve natural resources and protect the environment. This was given a significant boost with the appointment of two Indian Medical Service officers as conservators of forests in the Bombay (in 1847) and Madras (in 1856) Presidencies. They were at pains to highlight the impact of over-felling, shifting cultivation, and fires on the environment.

The second phase was marked by the formation of the Imperial Forest Service (IFS) in the mid-1860s. Although it appeared that the IFS was founded on the same commitment to conservation that marked the first phase, it was clear that the emphasis shifted slowly but irrevocably toward a narrow focus on the scientific and technical management of a valuable commercial resource (Weil 2006, p. 319). The Forest Policy Resolution of 1894 and the 1927 Forest Act, in particular, tipped the balance in favor of extraction rather than conservation of forest resources, placing increased emphasis on the management of revenue-generating resources through the sale of timber contracts (Weil 2006, pp. 335–336).

This was accompanied by an analogous shift in the state’s attitude toward local, predominantly tribal communities. In an important study of Thane district, Saldanha (1992, p. 2 and pp. 8–9) suggested that until the 1880s, despite its own competing demands, the colonial government had largely ignored tribal communities and continued to acknowledge their “traditional” or historic right to live in and utilize forest resources. However, Bombay’s need for water and forest land proved insatiable, and the hinterland fell increasingly under its sphere of influence. The lives of previously autonomous tribals were affected as the state progressively redefined their legal relationship to the forest. Thus, by 1894, in the wake of the flooding of villages and expropriation of land to make way for the Tansa dam, state discourse reduced long-standing residence and grazing “rights” to “rights and privileges,” a discretionary power that was expanded in a 1952 Government of India Resolution which spoke of “rights and concessions” and, further still, in subsequent government usage which referred simply to “concessions” (see Dhebar 1961, pp. 129–130). In Bombay, the administration wasted little time in incorporating the valuable forest resources on communal lands into its sphere of control. So extensive was this creation of defined forest areas that the 1887 Bombay Forest Commission reported the conversion of 401,566 acres of “community lands and free grazing lands” into forests. This appropriation almost doubled the size of forest areas in Bombay (Saldanha 1992).

The significance of this process of alienation should not be overlooked. It is this history of state expansion and the commodification of tribal livelihoods that must be considered as the background to any serious study of tribal “encroachment” on

demarcated forest lands today. Rather than simply condemning people for utilizing proclaimed forest resources or criticizing the impact of their supposedly destructive agricultural practices, it is necessary, first, to understand how forest resources have been appropriated by the state and, subsequent to this, how the competing needs of industrial and residential concerns have contributed further to the exclusion of indigenous peoples from the areas in which they have lived traditionally and from the resources upon which they have always depended.

This trend shaped the rest of the colonial period and continues to affect the lives of all those who depend on the forest today. Communities living in or near forests have been placed in a situation where they are forced, continually, to compete for access to the resources on which they have previously depended. Not surprisingly, this frequently brings them into conflict with the state, which views their residence in forest areas as illegal “encroachments”—premodern survivals at odds with the construction of the modern state.

If the first half of the twentieth century saw the emphasis shift dramatically toward the “scientific management” and extraction of valuable forest resources, the period after independence was more ambiguous. In theory, both the central and state governments were committed to seeking a more equitable balance between the rights of forest-dependent communities and the goals of conservation. In practice, conservation continued to be defined in a narrowly legalistic manner, which focused on demarcating protected areas and excluding tribal communities from these areas. In addition, as was the trend prior to independence, the focus continued to shift away from the protection of fragile and valuable ecosystems toward the commercial exploitation of forest resources in terms of both wood and land.

For our purposes, the most important post-independence legislation affecting Indian forests is the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, which sets out, comprehensively, to protect “wild animals, birds and plants and for matters connected therewith or ancillary or incidental thereto.” Central to the act is a distinction between different categories of protected areas, the most important of which are “sanctuaries,” “national parks,” and “closed areas.” Chapter IV of the act clarifies the process through which areas can be designated sanctuaries and sets out the state’s legal rights over and responsibility for these different categories of protected area. In our case, what is significant is the regulatory guidance that the act provides for the Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary. For the most part, the act lays the basis for a narrowly extractive form of sanctuary management, protecting the state’s rights and forbidding all other parties from removing any “timber, bamboo, and minor forest produce” from the reserved forest areas. This directly undermines traditional tribal ways of life and livelihood strategies and is a powerful mechanism of exclusion that has rendered tribals more dependent on marginal agricultural activities outside the protected forest areas.

But what became of the mostly tribal communities who lived in or around forests appropriated by the state? As the state took control of forest lands, these mostly tribal communities were rendered landless and dependent on the discretionary will of forest officials for access to the two resources upon which their traditional livelihoods depended: land and water. To regulate this, the government of Maharashtra

made a provision in the mid-1950s for the granting of *Ek Sali* leases,<sup>4</sup> a form of annual lease granted to tribals acknowledged to have been resident in forest areas for some time. These leases made a provision for basic subsistence agriculture on demarcated land around protected forests but would restrict, radically, tribal access to the forest and ability to harvest forest resources. In 1969, a provision was made for the granting of permanent leases, although these still required annual “regularization” (Saldanha 1992, pp. 25–34). The intention of these leases was to contain rather than encourage human settlements. In other words, they granted limited rights to extant settlements while, at the same time, prevented newcomers from settling in forest areas. In this way, the demands of conservation and development were supposedly balanced. Although these leases made it possible for communities to remain on the land, they increased the discretionary power of the wildlife division officials who granted and enforced the leases. Our interviews and oral histories with people living in our study area around the Tansa Lake consistently confirm a pattern of ongoing conflict between residents and forest officials. Leases would often only be granted once bribes were paid to wildlife division officials. It was also often unclear who was entitled to a lease and who was considered as a more recent, illegal resident. Forest officials were supposed to fine illegal settlers but would often simply solicit bribes in exchange for looking the other way.

More importantly, leases were only granted to a small percentage of the affected population. Although many tribals have lived in Tansa for generations, others have migrated to the area more recently and are classified as encroachers. Currently, the law only makes for the regularization of pre-1978 settlements. As such, these “encroachers” live in constant conflict with the law. Most of the peoples in our study area have lived there for some time, often generations, prior to 1978. It is not clear how many have been formally “regularized,” but it is unlikely that more than a small minority are able to satisfy the stringent requirements for the regularization process. Many thousands of tribals, therefore, continue to live illegally in the forests of Tansa, precariously clinging onto patches of land while battling against the elements that threaten their survival: erratic weather patterns that threaten agricultural and food security, wildlife division officials who demand bribes, conservationists pressing for their eviction in order to protect pristine forest resources, and their growing inability to resist incorporation into a cash economy. Faced with the choice of either surrendering completely to the dictates of a market economy they are ill equipped to deal with or seeking to eke out a miserable living on small patches of land, most tribals have chosen the latter option. The close symbolic attachment that tribals have to traditional forest land underpins this choice and determines, clearly, the rationality that underpins their livelihood strategies. Denied both voice and exit, tribals are trapped on marginal lands with no prospect of being uplifted and face the ever-present threat of complete economic collapse. Not surprisingly, this reinforces a destructive circle, bringing tribals and conservation authorities into increasing conflict over the two critical resources discussed earlier, namely, access to land and water.

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<sup>4</sup>Government of Maharashtra, Resolutions August 20, 1954, and July 21, 1958.



## 4.4 Peoples of the Tansa Forest

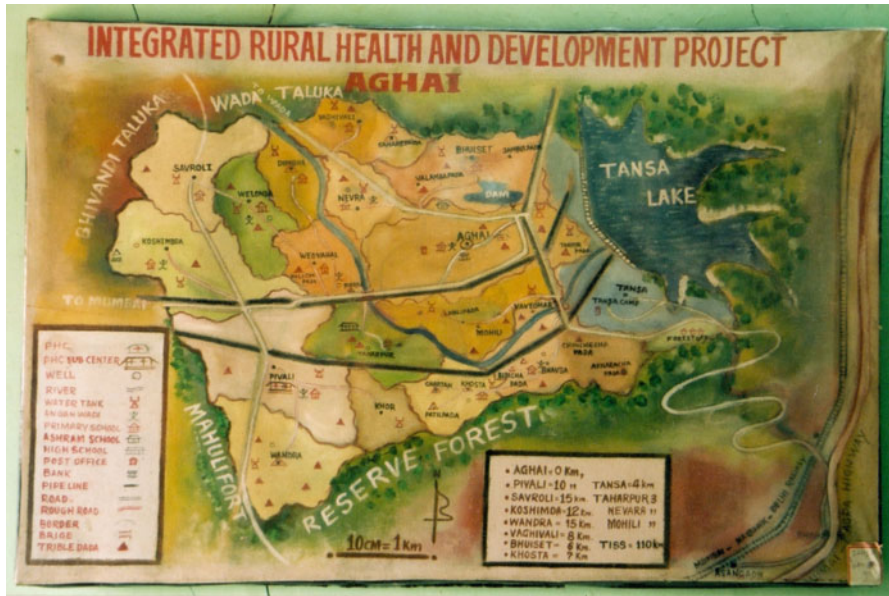
In order to gain a closer look into the life and times of the people living in and around the Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary, we draw upon the outlines of the output of a series of interviews and oral histories conducted between 2003 and 2006, as well as 728 extremely detailed quantitative studies of households conducted in 2006. The study area was selected on the basis of the long-standing involvement of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, with the communities under review. This secured us important access, which would otherwise not be available to researchers. All the villages and hamlets (*padas*) under Aghai, Pivali, Wandra, Mohili, and Taharpur Grampanchayats were studied. As the sanctuary is a protected forest, the communities living here are forbidden to enter the forest or to collect or harvest forest products. Similarly, despite acute water shortages in the area, no one is permitted to use any water from the Tansa dam. The huge water pipes that transport water from the Tansa dam via Aghai through to Mumbai serve as a constant reminder of this exclusion. The residents of Aghai and its surrounding villages are predominantly tribal in origin. However, in order to gain meaningful insight into the caste Hindu community and, most importantly, the relationship between tribals and the latter, a slightly exaggerated sample of the main caste Hindu community—the Maratha Kunbi—was included, as well as a small sample of other backward class (OBC) families and scheduled caste families.<sup>5</sup> As can be expected, almost all of the Maratha Kunbi community live in villages as opposed to the less developed *padas*. We now take a look at livelihoods and their contexts on the basis of residential clusters (Map 4.2).

### 4.4.1 Aghai Grampanchayat

The largest and most important settlement is the small town of Aghai, which has a total population of between 1,000 and 1,500 people. Aghai is a Grampanchayat in the Shahapur Taluka, with a mixture of tribal, upper caste, and scheduled caste inhabitants. Bhuiset, Thakurpada, Valambapada, Jambhulpada, Kalkapada, Ravtepada, and Karandipada are the outlying hamlets falling under Aghai's jurisdiction. About a quarter of the total sample of the study came from Aghai Grampanchayat. Like other towns in Shahapur Taluka, Aghai is poorly developed with a very underdeveloped administrative capacity, limited and badly maintained infrastructure, and few communication linkages. However, Aghai is enormously

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<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of India makes provision for the classification of economically and socially disadvantaged citizens according to their caste or socioeconomic status. This classification includes forward castes, scheduled castes (approximately 16% of the population), scheduled tribes (7–8%), and other backward classes (OBCs). A complex system of job reservation and incentive schemes have been developed to help promote the development of the latter three categories.



Map 4.2 Aghai Grampanchayat, showing the location of Tansa Lake

important for all the settlements because it is a large market town, with a primary health-care center (PHC), post office, primary school, and *ashram* school. Government buses and private jeeps ferry commuters (mostly traders) between Aghai and the Atgaon railway station 11 km away. Although there is a concrete road around the village, the road is not maintained properly, and there is little in the way of secondary road networks or storm water drainage. As such, the village is prone to flooding in the rainy season, which exacerbates already critical infrastructure shortcomings and increases incidences of several diseases. Medical facilities are inadequate, with the PHC having a crucial shortage of appropriate staff. Despite government promises, there is no agricultural or irrigational support available in Aghai.

The condition in the outlying *padas* is worse. Thakurpada, for instance, although only 2 km away from Aghai, has no proper road linkages, and the *pada* is inaccessible for much of the rainy season. This inaccessibility is a major barrier to development, significantly diminishing farmers' access to the local markets and reducing access of all residents to much needed health facilities. Most of the residents in Thakurpada are illiterate and very poor and live in largely makeshift accommodation. Only a minority of households have *pukka* houses. While there is little by way of public infrastructure, there is a government-run crèche (*balwadi*) and a primary school. Although many Thakur communities enjoy a relatively high social standing in Maharashtra, this is not the case here. Only a small minority own land, and the rest are forced to seek temporary employment, typically as agricultural laborers at a daily wage rate of Rs.50 (\$1.1) for men and Rs.40 (\$0.9) for women. Like most

*padas*, Thakurpada suffers from a severe shortage of potable water. There is a community well, which invariably dries up in the summer months. Although the *pada* is an easy 10-min walk from the Tansa Lake, no one is allowed to use the water. This very obvious exclusion from vital resources is a source of extreme tension in the area and simply serves to exacerbate the overall sense of deprivation and gloom. Thakurpada is a predominantly Marathi-speaking, Ka Thakur community. It remains an extremely closed community which opposes any form of assimilation, even with the locally much larger Ma Thakur group. While residents once worshipped local spirits, including *Hirva*, *Cheda*, *Vaghia*, and the *Mohili* mountain spirits, they have lately appeared to have embraced much of the Hindu pantheon, at least in terms of public ritual, as little is known about their private religious observances. Interestingly, Ganpati or Ganesha is an especially popular deity.

#### **4.4.2 Pivali Grampanchayat**

Pivali is the second largest village in our study area. It has a smaller and less developed market and similar and often worse levels of government capacity. Infrastructure here is considerably less developed than in Aghai. Koshimbapada is the only outlying hamlet here. There is a PHC which is within easy reach of the residents, but it is considered as inadequate by many and is seen as a costly source of medicine compared to alternative local sources of health care. Hence, it is invariably seen as a last resort. Water is a very scarce commodity throughout the Grampanchayat, and residents depend on unreliable seasonal wells for water. Their inability to use water from the Tansa dam for either irrigation or drinking is a source of considerable frustration. Most residents in Pivali do not own land, and of those who do, only a considerable minority consider their landholdings adequate for their subsistence needs. As such, nearly all residents are dependent on alternative livelihood strategies for survival. Most utilize the wildlife sanctuary one way or the other, typically for minor forest produce but also as land for paddy. Only one resident claimed to have permission to do so. While roughly 40% of households migrate outside the area in search of seasonal employment, individuals within households are quick to embrace local opportunities for paid labor, on other farms, brick kilns, or nearby factories.

#### **4.4.3 Wandra Grampanchayat**

The Wandra Grampanchayat includes the villages of Wandra and Khor and nine surrounding *padas*, namely, Shengepada, Kakdapada, Blanupada, Bagujipada, Bavrapada, Ghatulapada, Paradipada, Satheypada, and Alanapada. Both Wandra and Khor are extremely underdeveloped villages. Neither has proper health-care facilities, leading to residents being reliant, instead, on facilities in Aghai and Pivali. A relatively high number of residents own their land and believe that their landholdings

are sufficient for their survival. Perhaps for this reason, relatively low numbers of households migrate seasonally in search of work—only 31% in the case of Wandra and 7% in the case of Khor. Individual members of households do, however, seek seasonal employment on an ongoing, albeit, ad hoc basis. The extent to which people are able to survive on agriculture alone is unusual in the study area.

Both Wandra and Pivali border the reserved forest, and most households make use of this land, either for agricultural purposes, which bring them into frequent conflict with the forest department, or to harvest minor forest products. Nearly all respondents admitted that they did not have permission to use this land and spoke of ongoing struggles with the forest department to have the land regularized. Not surprisingly, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), which has taken up the cause of forest-dependent communities in Thane district, has a marked presence in the Wandra Grampanchayat. A significant number of households belong to the CPI(M), and most acknowledge that the Party has played a key role in supporting them in their struggle against the forest department.

#### ***4.4.4 Mohili Grampanchayat***

The Mohili Grampanchayat includes the villages of Waghiwali, Nevare, and Mohili, as well as Saharepada, Malipada, and Vavegharpada. Although these villages lack basic infrastructure, especially roads, storm water drainage, reliable telecommunications and electrification, and potable water, they are relatively well serviced by the rural PHC clinics. Residents in Waghiwali have considerably more tenure and food security than residents in Nevare. Most residents of Waghiwali own their own land, and of these landowners, almost two-thirds regard their holdings as adequate for their subsistence needs. This is confirmed by the fact that the same number of Waghiwali households claims that they do not migrate as whole households in search of seasonal work. In contrast, just over half the households in Nevare own their own land, of whom the vast majority claim that their holdings are not adequate for subsistence needs. Two-fifths of the households are forced to migrate in search of seasonal work. As elsewhere in the study area, whole households that do not migrate annually in search of employment often send individual family members to neighboring farms or to brick kilns and factories in search of ad hoc, seasonal employment.

Perhaps because of these differences, membership of the CPI(M)—seen here as a main index of political tension over access to forest resources—varies considerably. While only a third of households surveyed in Waghiwali belong to the CPI(M), two-thirds of households in Nevare, and all households in Mohili, belong to the CPI(M). One reason for the relative agricultural viability in Mohili Grampanchayat is their favorable access to the river Tansa, which provides sufficient water for small-scale irrigation and the production of more than one paddy crop per year. Residents also have a variety of different sources of drinking water, including the river, ponds, and (albeit inadequate) wells. There are some public taps in Waghiwali and Nevare.

#### 4.4.5 Taharpur Grampanchayat

The Taharpur Grampanchayat includes the small villages of Taharpur and Vedavahal, as well as the outlying settlements of Palichapada and Dimba (the last of which is not a part of our study area). All of these villages lack basic infrastructure, with only rudimentary health-care facilities, roads, storm water drainage, post office, and schools. Vedavahal has a primary school, while Taharpur has a PHC subcenter. As in Mohili Grampanchayat, there is some variance between these villages in terms of tenure and livelihood security. In Taharpur, fully two-thirds of respondents do not own land, while almost all of those with land claim that this is not sufficient for their subsistence needs. In Vedavahal, by contrast, over two-thirds of households own their own land, all of whom claimed that this land was sufficient for subsistence needs. Despite this, most households in both communities migrate seasonally in search of work, which suggests that Vedavahal's claim to food security is overstated. In addition to household migration, individuals in both communities regularly seek seasonal work in brick kilns, other farms, and factories (Mondal 2004).

Although households in both the villages do not border the wildlife sanctuary, almost all residents interviewed admitted to using protected forest land for their agricultural activities. Residents throughout the Grampanchayat see the CPI(M) as their main supporter in the struggle against the forest department. Ninety-six percent of respondents in Taharpur, and 69% in Vedavahal, belong to the Party, the differences perhaps a reflection of the latter community's relative sense of livelihood security.

The bulk of the households surveyed in our study were tribal families—some 78%—in addition to which we also included a significant number of Kunbi families (19%) and a small sample of scheduled caste families. The main tribal communities were Warlis, Katkaris, and Ma Thakurs. There were also a smaller number of Ka Thakurs, Konkana, Malhar Koli, and Mahadeo Koli. In addition, a number of forward and OBC communities live in this area, the most socially and economically important of these being members of the Maratha Kunbi caste.

The Warli community is the fourth largest tribal community in Maharashtra. There are approximately 300,000 Warli peoples living in Thane, the majority of whom depend on subsistence farming. This farming background is valued deeply and is an integral component of Warli self-identity. Indeed, the name, *Warli*, is derived from the word, *waral*, which means land or field. Although deeply influenced by the Hindu settlements in northern Maharashtra, the Warli retain much of their original identity and belief systems. Despite severe land shortages and a chronic shortage of water, Warli communities retain an extraordinary commitment to forest-based and agricultural livelihoods and are perhaps the tribal group least likely to abandon these in the face of economic ruin (Mondal 2004).

The Katkaris are an indigenous Konkan people, the name a corruption of *kat* or catechu (betel palm) that they once produced. Today, they are, by far, the poorest tribal community in Thane and face the greatest levels of discrimination. Once classified as a "criminal tribe," the Katkaris are now considered a "primitive tribal group," on account of their supposedly "preagricultural level of technology," low

levels of literacy, and the fact that their population numbers have remained stagnant or have begun to decline (see Anon 2001, p. 3 and *passim*). Katkaris are mostly landless laborers and have been forced into bonded labor as a result of widespread indebtedness. Katkaris are also forced to work on brick kilns and as agricultural laborers, often for more than 150 days in a year. Most of them till the fields or work in the brick kilns of the Kunbi community. Some supplementary income is secured from minor forest produce, largely from gum collection. As with many tribal communities, Katkaris have been considerably influenced by Hinduism, although their low social status reinforces a significant degree of social ostracization. They seem to have retained far more of their indigenous belief systems as compared to other tribal communities. However, like many tribal communities, women enjoy considerable social freedom and are allowed to divorce and remarry.

The Thakurs enjoy a relatively higher social standing, although, for the most part, they depend on small-scale subsistence agriculture and seasonal wage labor. In the study area, both the Ka Thakurs and Ma Thakurs are, for the most part, marginal farmers, increasingly dependent on wage labor to supplement their own agricultural activities and are invariably poorly educated. Dependent in part on the Kunbis for work, many Thakurs have abandoned any hope of increasing their landholdings and access to water, both essential prerequisites to agricultural viability, and now see education and government jobs as their main opportunity for advancement. In this regard, they have been far more successful than other tribal groups in the area, especially the Katkaris, in developing alternative, nonagricultural livelihood strategies.

#### 4.5 Caste, Tribe, and Livelihood

As a relative socioeconomic elite at the local level and as a community linked to the Maharashtrian political elite through ties of blood, kinship, and patronage, Kunbis in Thane district are the major beneficiaries—as both administrators and recipients—of state development aid and support. By contrast, the tribal community, as we saw above, is an extremely disadvantaged community, generally struggling to retain their traditional ties to the land while being forced, increasingly, to enter the broader market economy as landless agricultural and wage laborers. The very significant socioeconomic status of Kunbis and tribals in Thane is underpinned by different access to land and water, as well as the ability of the Kunbi community to use educational and other resources to develop alternative nonagricultural livelihoods and to engage more fruitfully with the market economy.

Within the study area, almost all the Kunbi households surveyed claimed to have their own land, as opposed to 61% of the tribal community. These statistics mask, however, the very different conditions under which land has been acquired and a widespread lack of legal title to land among the tribal community. Thus, while most Kunbi households claimed to own their land, only a small percentage encroached on forest land. Among the tribal community, by contrast, over half of

land “ownership” has actually been forest land. More importantly, the size and viability of land differ considerably. Almost half (48%) of tribal landholdings are between 1 and 3 acres, although many are smaller, either 25–40 guntas<sup>6</sup> (18%) or 10–24 guntas (17%). Kunbi landholdings, not surprisingly, are generally larger. Almost two-thirds of their landholdings are between 1 and 3 acres, and almost a 3rd are between 3 and 5 acres.

Kunbi land is either used productively for agriculture—a reflection of *relatively* large land size, fertility, and access to water—or is put to effective nonagricultural use. The Kunbi community has, for example, been remarkably successful in developing small-scale businesses in the Aghai area, notably brick kilns and small factories. Kunbi farmers have far better access to grazing land (69% as opposed to only 17% for the tribal community) and are correspondingly less dependent on forest land for grazing. While both communities complain about diminishing land fertility, overcrowding, and a shortage of water for irrigation, it is clear that Kunbi landholdings are considerably more viable than tribal holdings. Thus, whereas the overwhelming majority of Kunbi landholders (86%) are able to produce enough food grains for their family needs during the entire year, only 43% of all tribal landholders have this level of food security.

## 4.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have provided a general overview of the life and times of the various communities scattered around the Tansa Lake and Wildlife Sanctuary against the shadow of the megalopolis of Mumbai and its incessant hunger for land and water. We have also reviewed the livelihoods of these communities, focusing on their access to both land and water. Central to tribal life has been the struggle to secure a foothold on historic communal land and, especially in the case of recent migrants to the area, to have landholdings regularized. As we have seen, tribals are excluded from much local development due to the marginal size and productivity of their landholdings. On account of this socioeconomic vulnerability, tribals are increasingly forced to reduce their reliance on agricultural activities and the forest, with which they have been associated for generations, and to become wage laborers on other (usually Kunbi-) owned farms and small businesses.

Although the local state has made some effort to regularize pre-1978 land settlements, tribal households are still, for the most part, treated as illegal encroachers and an ever-present threat to the integrity of the wildlife sanctuary. Tribal farming techniques are blamed for the ecological denigration of the forest over the past half century, while supposedly “primitive” tribal social practices (rather than land hunger) are blamed for high death rates and levels of malnutrition. Tribals, in this view of the world, are simply jungle rats, a threat to the twin (and all-too-contradictory)

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<sup>6</sup> In India, 40 guntas = 1 acre. 1 gunta = 101.17 m<sup>2</sup>.

forces that drive contemporary Maharashtrian politics: the ever-present “march of the modern and the urban,” in the sense of economic transformation, development, and expansion of Mumbai, and the rise of the violently antimodern Maratha-Hindu political movements. In both cases, tribal landholdings and ways of life are seen as a threat. The expansion of Mumbai business interests implies an increased encroachment of the few remaining open spaces of Mumbai’s hinterland. The existence of indigenous (tribal/*adivasi*) communities living outside the world of caste Hindu politics implies a threat to the hegemony of the Maratha-Hindu caste nexus. In both cases, tribals and the forests within which they live are seen as a threat.

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