

# **Navigating History : A Socio- Historical Exploration of Gabit Community in Southern Konkan**

**Mr. Nachiket B. Paradkar**

  
**Vedika Publication Limited**

Navigating History : A Socio-Historical Exploration of Gabit Community in Southern Konkan - 1

## **Navigating History : A Socio-Historical Exploration of Gabit Community in Southern Konkan**

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*Dedicated to the memories of my Aaji and a proud Gabit **Late Shrimati Savitri Jhimaji Khawle (1939-2022)**. My debate with her over the term 'Gabit' inspired me to dig out unknown facts about the Community in the project...*

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- **Mr. Nachiket B. Paradkar**

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## Chapter I Introduction

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**T**he Gabit community, nestled in the landscape of Southern Konkan, embodies a tapestry of history and culture that has often been ignored by mainstream narratives. As India, with its kaleidoscope of diversity, continues to unravel the intricate threads of its various communities, Gabit community stand as a testament to the resilience and complexity of the human experience. However, their story remains largely untold, due to prejudice and oversight that have characterized historical documentation.

In the annals of ethnographic inquiry, the Gabit community occupies a unique position—one that beckons scholars and researchers to delve deeper into its socio-historical tapestry. Since the colonial era, endeavors such as the Ethnographic Survey of India and the Census of India have sought to capture the mosaic of ethnic diversity that defines the Indian subcontinent. Amid these efforts, the Gabit community found itself marginalized, its narrative distorted by misrepresentation and oversight. Spread across the coastal regions of Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka States the Community is found predominantly from Ratnagiri to Honawar.<sup>1</sup> Gabit Community was referred to as ‘Fishermen’ in British official documents,

despite their involvement in maritime activities on the Western Coast.<sup>2</sup> Proud of their Maratha Origin, Gabit leaders waged noteworthy struggles in the 1920s-40s to claim their Maratha status; but they didn't focus to widen their identity on official papers - Fishermen to Maritime Community.

The Monograph on Gabit Community published as a part the of Ethnographic Survey of India was the first official account of the community. It was republished in R. E. Enthoven's 'Tribes and Castes of Bombay, Volume I' (1920).<sup>3</sup> 'The Gabits: Sea-Farers of the Konkan Coast' (1966), a M. A. Dissertation by Mr. V. A. Deshmukh submitted to the Dept of Sociology, University of Mumbai provides a picturesque description of the socio-cultural and economic life of Gabit Community based on an intensive field study of 6 villages and interviews of around 1200 individuals from more than 30 villages.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ramesh Kubal's '*Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Maratha Gharanyancha Itihas*' (1983) was a fruit of the Gabit Community's initiative aimed to revisit and rewrite its history based on survey based evidences.<sup>5</sup>

It is against this backdrop of neglect and oversight that the research proposal, 'Navigating History : A Socio-Historical Exploration of Gabit Community in Southern Konkan' emerges. Anchored in a profound recognition of the richness and complexity of Gabit history, this endeavor seeks to unearth the buried treasures of a

community whose contributions have often gone unrecognized. Led by a commitment to rectify historical injustices and illuminate the path toward a more inclusive future, this research endeavor embarks on a journey of rediscover - a journey that promises to reshape our understanding of the Gabit community and its place within the tapestry of Southern Konkan's socio-cultural landscape.

Building upon the pioneering work of Dr. Ramesh Kubal, whose seminal volume 'Gabit : Kshatriya Aarmari Gharanyacha Itihas' (1983) laid the foundation for understanding 'real' history of Gabit community, this research seeks to chart new territories and challenge existing narratives. While Kubal's work provided a crucial starting point, the passage of time demands a fresh perspective-one that incorporates new arguments, addresses historical gaps, and reclaims the Gabit narrative from the margins of obscurity. With this imperative driving its mission, the research articulates a set of objectives that delineate its scope and ambition. Through a meticulous exploration of Gabit cultural heritage, the study aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of traditional practices, rituals, art forms, and social customs that define the Gabit identity. By delving into the socio-economic dynamics of the community, it seeks to illuminate both their historical contributions and the contemporary challenges they face in navigating a rapidly changing world.

The chief limitation of the study is its focus on Maharashtrian Gabit Community which resides predominantly in Southern Konkan – present Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg Districts.<sup>6</sup> This work doesn't deal with the Gabit Community of Goa and Karnataka States. Secondly, due to the unavailability of Mr. V. A. Deshmukh's M.A. Dissertation, the work relies on its published abstract.

This work has employed the 'Empirical Research' method to have an evidence-based approach for interpretation. Along with a Literature Review of the above-mentioned sources; published official records available physically or online, along with unpublished records in Maharashtra State Archives were studied to gather enough data to provide fact-based support to the argument. Responses from four dignitaries received through Interviews provided various inputs about the community's way of life in the past and present. In this way, though analyzing the past events; the work has tried to maintain its relevance in presence as well.

The role of coastal communities in the history of the Maratha Navy has received little attention. This work has tried how Gabit Community contributed its share in the history of the Maratha Navy. The project further provides inputs to Government of Maharashtra authorities and Sagarmala Coastal Community Development Initiative to have a brief overview of the community and thus

support initiatives taken by community members, to introduce skill development programs by linking modern ideas with their traditional knowledge.

In conclusion, ‘Navigating History’ represents more than a scholarly pursuit; it is a journey of discovery, redemption, and empowerment. Through its rigorous inquiry and commitment to truth, it seeks to reclaim the narrative about the community from the margins of obscurity and inscribe it upon the annals of history where it rightfully belongs. As the research unfolds, it holds the promise of not only illuminating the past but also shaping the future—a future in which Gabit community stands tall, its contributions celebrated, and its identity firmly anchored in the fabric of Southern Konkan’s rich tapestry.

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[english/gazetteer/Ratnagiri%20and%20Sawantwadi/home.html](#), Retrieved on February 02, 2024.

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4. V. A. Deshmukh, *The Gabits: Sea-farers of the Konkan Coast*, pp. 159-164.

5. Ramesh Kubal, *Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Gharanyancha Itihas* (M), Kshatriya Kulavatansa Aarmari Maratha Samaj, Mumbai, 1983, pp. 184-185.

6. Government of Maharashtra, *State Backward Classes Commission Report No. 17*, Pune, February 2006, p. 53.

## Chapter II

### Gabit: Origin and Antiquity

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**E**ach Caste and Community in India has its history and culture. Gabit, the Caste from Southern Konkan, while claiming themselves *Aarmari Maratha*, argues that their ancestors, originally Marathas were employed on *Gurab*, a Maratha warship from which they derive the name Gabit. This chapter while discussing various attempts made to decipher the origin and antiquity of the term Gabit, tries to Find Out possible answers behind the unknown facts about the term Gabit.

#### 2.1. Origin of the Term ‘Gabit’ - Lexicographic Study and Theories

The term Gabit is not found in Puranic Literature, unlike Koli and Bhandari. Hence, various lexicographers since British Era in their dictionaries tried to discuss the term in the Medieval context. Some of the significant interpretations are given in Table.

Sr. No.	Lexicographer	Title of Dictionary	Year of Publication	Interpretation
1.	Molesworth	A Dictionary English and Marathi	1857	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Gabit, Gabid and Gabti are same words.</li><li>◆ Fishing Caste of the Southern Konkan Coast.</li></ul>

2.	Y. R. Date	Maharashtra Shabdakosh Vol. III	1934	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Gabti and not Gabit</li> <li>◆ A Konkani caste from Rajapur region engaged in fishing.</li> <li>◆ Same as Kharvi.</li> <li>◆ Maratha soldiers on <i>Gurab</i>, an Arabic <i>Galbat</i>.</li> </ul>
		Supplementary to Maharashtra Shabdakosh	1950	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Gabit as a Seafarers' Community</li> </ul>
3.	K. P. Kulkarni	Marathi Vyutpattikosh	1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Gabit as an officer in Maratha Navy</li> <li>◆ Derived from <i>Ghurab/Gurab</i></li> </ul>
4.	S. R. Desay	Konkani Shabdakosh Vol. I	1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Same as Kharvi</li> <li>◆ Expert Fisherfolk</li> </ul>

(Note: from Ramesh Kubal, *Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Gharanyacha Itihas*, pp. 25-27; S. R. Desay, *Konkani Shabdakosh*, Vol. I, Sri Sitaram Prakashan, Goa, 1980, p. 160.)

It seems that most of the lexicographers except Y. R. Date, have followed Molesworth's narrative. The popular ideas and above interpretations can be summarized in two theories about the origin of the community:

1. Gabit is originally a fisher caste from Southern Konkan synonymous with Kharvis. Dr. Ramesh Kubal has countered the narrative with an argument. Gabit and Kharvi are two different castes in the Konkan region.<sup>1</sup> A group from Gabit Community supports the 'fishermen' theory. According to them, Gabit is a corrupted form of

the word *Gabhit*.<sup>2</sup> *Gabhi* means the gap between two rocks. As their ancestors used to enter in *Gabhi* of coastal rocks for fishing, they were referred to as *Gabhit* (Those who enter in *Gabhi*) and later on as *Gabit*.<sup>3</sup>

2. The term ‘*Gabit*’ owes its origin to ‘*Gurab*,’ a Maratha warship and it came in current during Shivaji’s times. It was used to describe individuals employed on *Gurabs*. The term evolved as:

**Gurab/Grab -> Gurabit/Grabit/Grabti -> Gabit/  
Gabti -> Gabit**

Due to the absence of concrete evidence and reliance on oral arguments; the origin of the term *Gabit* is ambiguous, but its relation with both fishing and *Gurabs* can’t be denied. Hence, it is essential to know the antiquity of the term as studied by P. K. Gode.

## **2.2. Antiquity of the Term ‘*Gabit*’**

The popular narrative and lexicographic interpretations link the antiquity of the term *Gabit* to the times of Chhatrapati Shivaji as the community derived its name for their expertise in manning *Gurabs* in Maratha Navy, his brainchild. P. K. Gode, in his article ‘Caste Name – *Gabit*’ (1938) countered this narrative with textual evidence. He found a land sale-deed dated February 28, 1633, signed at Dabhole (in Present Devgad Taluka) where the term *Gabit* is mentioned thrice and is coupled with the word *Mumri*.<sup>4</sup> Two of the signatories who signed on it were the residents of *Gabit Mumri*.<sup>5</sup>

As born in 1630 CE, Chhatrapati Shivaji was too young to think of Navy and *Gurabs* in 1633. Thus, P. K. Gode argues that even if the term Gabit had derived from a foreign word, a period of approximately half a century was essential for its natural adoption in the regular life of a country. Thus, the word Gabit in the Marathi language was in use at least from 1580 CE, much earlier than the era of Chhatrapati Shivaji.

Dr. Ramesh Kubal while emphasizing on Maratha origin of Gabits, has argued that families from Gabit Community originally belonged to the Rajput-Maratha clan that were later on getolated with the adoption of fishing as an occupation. He published a *Mahjar* of 1564 CE in the possession of a Gabit Tandel family residing at Malond to which the ancestors of the family are referred as *Parabhu Maratha*.<sup>6</sup> In Southern Konkan, Officials from Brahmin, Maratha and Shenvi Castes were referred in as *Parabhu*.<sup>7</sup> This narrative indirectly supports the popular idea about origin. But the question remains about the origin of the term ‘Gabit’.

### **2.3. Gabits in Maratha Navy: From *Taru* to *Gurabs***

The saga of the Maratha Navy was a military revolution as Chhatrapati Shivaji, from a zero, founded the navy and made it competent enough to face Europeans in the Sea. As Sabhasad describes, he steered the sea as his vessels started sailing across Western Coast.<sup>8</sup> Ramchandra Pant Amatya described the navy as an

independent and essential limb of the State.<sup>9</sup> By compelling European ships to purchase *Dastak*, a permit to sail on Western Coast; Sarkhel Angres and Subedar Dhulaps led Maratha Navy as a strong contestant in the struggle for sea sovereignty in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Similarly, the Sindhudurg fleet of Chhatrapatis of Kolhapur and Savantwadi Navy proved troublesome for European powers in Southern Konkan due to their royal ‘piratical’ activities.<sup>10</sup>

Coastal Communities oppressed till Chhatrapati Shivaji’s Konkan conquest, saw Maratha Navy as a prestigious opportunity to use their martial and sailing skills essential to face Europeans on the sea. Gabit, a local sailor community was one of them. A Konkani proverb while highlighting the sailing skills of Gabits says:

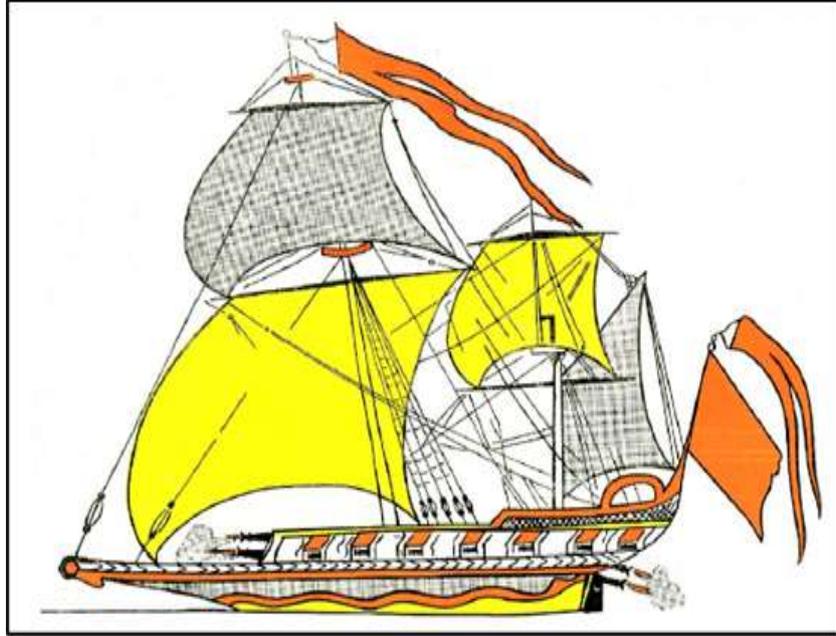
***Bhatak Tarava Gabtyak Gorava Kuni Sangli ?***<sup>11</sup>

It means that no one has asked *Bhat* (A Brahmin) to navigate *Tarava* (A flotilla of *Taru*) and Gabit (A Sailor) to tend *Gorava* (Cattle). *Taru* was a kind of freight-ship carrying both goods and people. Ganoba Tari, a Gabit *Taru* sailor from Bande was awarded for alerting Chhatrapati Shivaji and Maratha Army from a supposed Portuguese attack; and later joined Maratha Navy.<sup>12</sup> Gabits as expert sailors were recruited in the Maratha Navy, which is confirmed in an assurance letter of Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre, to Shiv Tandel Mumarkar, where Kanhoji Angre

encouraged him to bring Gabit sailors from the Malwan region to Gabit Mumri to run boats.<sup>13</sup>

Although members of various coastal communities were employed on *Gurabs*, Gabits, are referred to as *Gurabkar* or *Gurabitandels*.<sup>14</sup> *Gurab* was the second largest warship in Maratha Navy. It had a carriage capacity of about 100-300 tons and the crew on it consisted of *Sardar* (Captain), *Shipai* (Soldiers) and *Daryavardi* (Sailors). *Tandel* was referred to as oarsmen's leader and the captain of a flotilla of small ships.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it seems that employed as sailors initially, Gabits gradually engaged in all activities associated with *Gurabs* – Construction, Maintenance, and Expeditions.

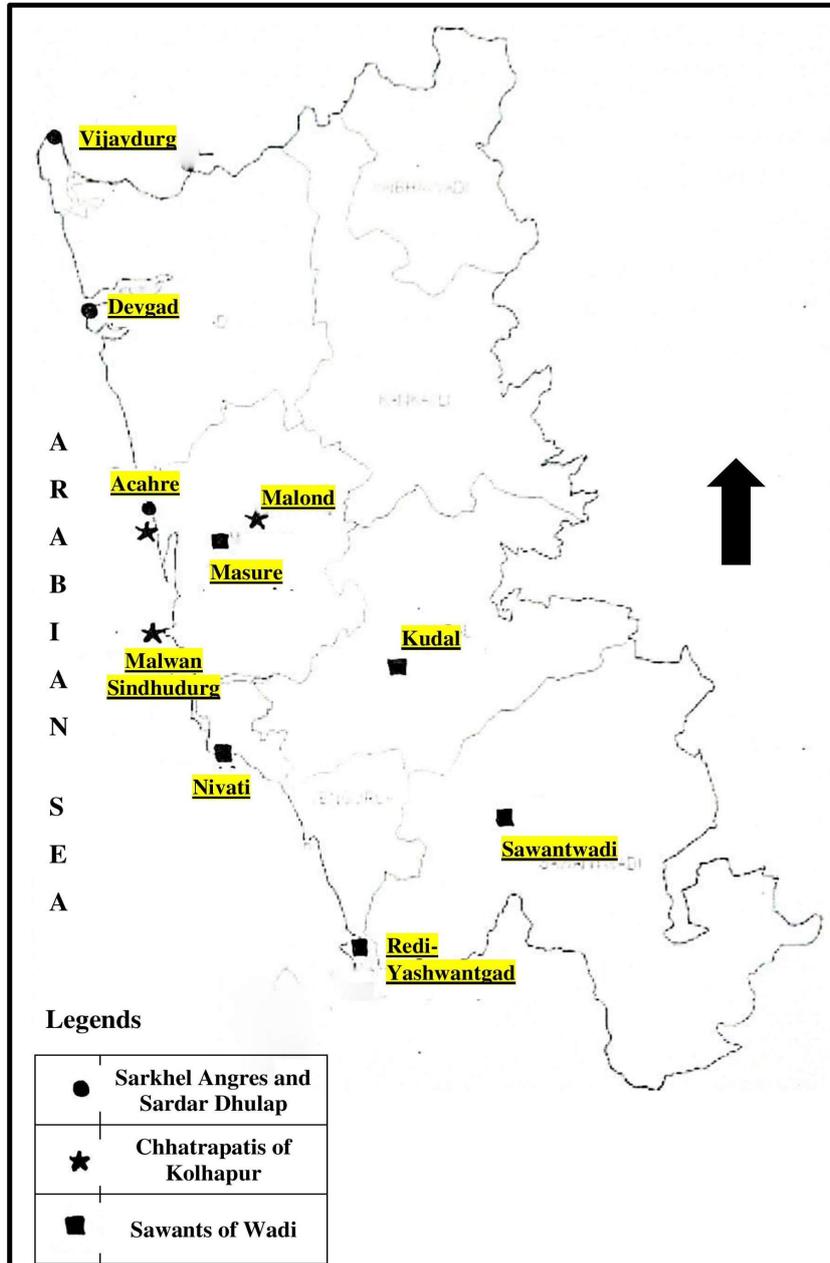
Chhatrapati Shivaji and Sarkhel Angres realized to incorporate European Shipbuilding and navigational skills in traditional knowledge to increase the efficiency of Maratha naval ships. Indigenous staff from coastal communities under European experts—Portuguese and British, grasped western skills to enhance their traditional knowledge. Vijaydurg dockyard was famous for the construction of *Gurabs* and *Galbats* in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>16</sup> Gabits in the region on higher scale probably provided skilled labour to construct *Gurabs* rigged in the European manner, and to keep annual maintenance.<sup>17</sup> Thus, they were preferred as *Tandels* and *Daryavardis* to man the vessels. In this way, Gabit sailors may have become *Gurabkar* and *Gurabitandels*, a driving force behind *Gurabs*.



**Figure 1: A Full-rigged *Gurab***

(Source: B. K. Apte, *A History of The Maratha Navy and Merchantships*, p. 135.)

Due to their caliber, some of them led campaigns as *Sarangs*, *Tandels* and *Sardars*, the chief sailors on ships. *Savalya Tandel*, a historical novel based on popular narratives helps us to reveal the journey of a Gabit from a *Daryavardi* to *Tandel*. Savalya, Ganoba Tari's son, initially recruited as a *Daryavardi* achieves captainship of 12 *Mahagiris* with his valor.<sup>18</sup> Subhanji Kharade, Pilaji Dhavale, and Vitthal Aadhav in Shivaji's era whereas Babaji Rane, Maloji and Govind Phadke, Shiv and Ganoji Tandel under Angres and Sawants were *Sardars* in Maratha Navy from Gabit Community.<sup>19</sup>



**Map 1: Maraha Nval Powers in Southern Konkan and their naval bases (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century CE)**

The term Gabit has an ambiguous origin as researchers have to rely on oral history. Fishing and sailing essentially shaped the history of the Community. As the term is older than Chhatrapati Shivaji's times; the scope of research further widens to Medieval Konkan of Deccan Sultanate era. During its transition from *Daryavardi* to *Gurabitandels* in Maratha Navy, Gabits became one of the 'bulwarks' of naval activities in Southern Konkan and thus a maritime community.

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2. *Maharashtra State Backward Classes Commission Report No. 17*, p. 52.
3. Ibid.
4. P. K. Gode, "Caste Name Gabit," in S. R. Tikekar (ed.), *Sardesai Commemoration Volume*, K. B. Dhavale Prakashan, Bombay (Mumbai), 1938, pp. 213-222, *NDLI*, [http://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/document Zm5ZbjM5TURJTURQWXhGK3RwSlDUSXRuR2VK\\_L2NxbktadDRuZ2NmSDZaWT0](http://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/document/Zm5ZbjM5TURJTURQWXhGK3RwSlDUSXRuR2VK_L2NxbktadDRuZ2NmSDZaWT0), Retrieved on January 30, 2024
5. Gabit Mumri was erstwhile name of Taramumbri, a village in the vicinity of present Devgad-Jamsande. See Appendix B, the Map of Devgad Taluka.
6. Ramesh Kubal, *Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Maratha Gharanyancha Itihas*, p. 39.

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10. Edward Moor, 'Note on Piracy on Konkan Coast,' in *Hindu Infanticide, An Account of the Measures adopted for suppressing the practice of the Systematic Murder by their parents of Female Infants*, J. Johnson and Co., London, 1811, p. 155, *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/hinduinfanticide00moor>, Retrieved on February 05, 2024.
11. Sriram Mantri, *Vengurle Boli Aathavanitil Mhani aani Humani* (M), Indranil Prakashan, Mumbai, 2004, p. 52.
12. Ramesh Kubal, *Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Maratha Gharanyancha Itihas*, p. 209.
13. P. K. Gode, Caste Name Gabit, p. 220. A Letter of Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre to Shiv Tandel Mumbarkar, August 27, 1722 in Salshi Daftar in possession of BISM, Pune. It says - होडीस दर्यावर्दी नाही याकरिता साहेबी कृपाळू होऊन दर्यावर्दी आणखी आणावया कौल सादर करितील तरी मालवणाहून गाबीत चौगपांचजण घेऊन येईन म्हणोन अर्ज केला, त्यावरून तुजला हे अभयपत्र सादर केले असे. तरी उमेद धरून गाबीत जे येतील ते घेऊन येणें.

14. Ramesh Kubal, and Ankush Sarang, *Konkancha Gabit Shigmotsav* (M), Aparna Prakashan, Thane, 2003, p. 48; R. Enthoven (ed.), *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, Vol. I, p. 347.

15. D. G. Dhabu, *Kulabkar Angre Sarkhel* (M), originally published by Author, Alibaug, 1939, republished by Shri ShivSamarth Seva Prakashan, Nashik, 2021, pp. 347, 364.

16. Ibid., pp. 346-347. See Appendix C, Fig. 13.

17. Edward Moor, Note on Piracy on Konkan Coast, pp. 155-156; B. K. Apte, *A History of The Maratha Navy and Merchantships*, Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, Bombay (Mumbai), 1973, Appendix C-1, Extracts 38-

18. Marathas rigged *Gurabs* with topmasts, yards, shrouds, backstays, square sails on the line of European Galleys. Annual Maintenance of a *Gurab* included applying corrosion preventive paints, covering the ship with palm branches during monsoon and repairing damaged parts.

18. Dwarakanath M. Pitale, *SriShivaji Maharajanche Aarmar aathva Savalya Tandel* (M), Hind Agency, Mumbai, 1914, *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.366348>, Retrieved on March 15, 2024. D. M. Pitale alias Nath Madhav wrote a series of novels on Maratha History. ‘Savalya Tandel’ is a historical fiction based on rise of Maratha Navy under Chhatrapati Shivaji. It is a story of Savalya Tandel, a fictional character popular among Gabits. Though can’t be an authentic historical source, it helps readers to understand how Chhatrapati Shivaji channelized maritime skills of Konkani

Communities for Maratha Navy.

19. Ramesh Kubal, and Ankush Sarang, *Konkancha Gabit Shigmotsav*, pp. 20-21.

## Chapter III

### A Life of a Gabit : An Overview

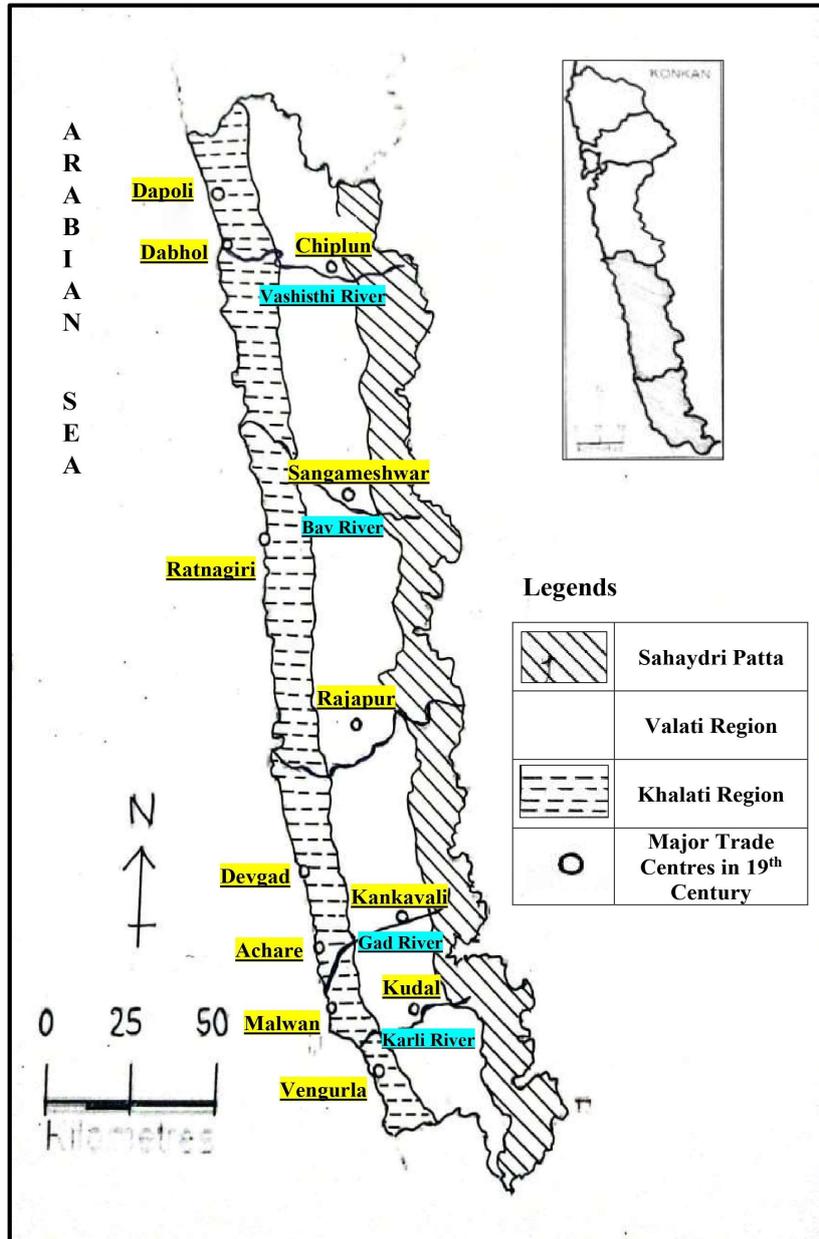
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#### **A) A Life of a Gabit: Spatial and Economic Study**

The geographical conditions of Southern Konkan have provided a ‘niche’ that enabled Gabit Community to shape and sustain their way of life in the region. This chapter, while exploring about the life of a Gabit from a spatial and economic perspective, discusses Gabit localities in Southern Konkan their cuisine and clothing; and throws light on continuity and change in the economic life of the community in the 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Century.

#### **3.1.1. Geographical Background of Southern Konkan**

Konkan is a narrow patch of low land lying between the Arabian Sea and Sahyadri hills. Southern Konkan consisting of present Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg Districts has three major geographical divisions—Sahyadri (Hilly region), *Valati* (Plateaus with the capping of Laterite Rocks), and *Khalati* (Coast).<sup>1</sup> (See Map 2.) Rivers, with narrow but deep valleys and riverine islands (*Juve*); have developed a patch of fertile land on the banks in *Valati* providing a space for riverine ports. Muggy Summer and fierce Monsoon are the climatic features of Southern Konkan. Gabit Settlements are predominantly located in



**Map 2: Geographical Map of Southern Konkan**

*Khalati* and *Valati* regions and thus Gabits have acquired skills to adapt to natural conditions in the region.

### **3.1.2. Gabit Localities in Southern Konkan**

Gabits being employed in Maratha Navy selected such places of abode where Gurabs were in operation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Gabit localities are found near the villages on the coastline, along river banks and creeks providing easy access to waters. The list of villages with Gabit localities in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg Districts are as follows:

#### **Villages with Gabit Localities in Southern Konkan<sup>3</sup>**

Rajapur Taluka : Sagave (Shirse, Katradevi, Jambhari), Palaye, Juve Jaitapur, Ambolgad.

Devgad Taluka : Manche, Vaghotan, Mutat, Vijaydurg, Girye-Bande, Trilot-Amberi, Padel, Nadan-Virwadi, Mond-Mondtar, Tembhvali, Baparde, Wanivade, Gaditamhane, Wadatar, Devgad-Jamsande (Taramumbri, Devgad Fort, Devgad Sada, Kankhol, Anandwadi), Mithmumbri, Kunkeshwar, Mithbaon-Dahibaon,, Tambaldeg, Morve, Munage, Aadbandar.

Malwan Taluka : Achara-Pirawadi, Belne-Ramgad, Chunvare, Malond, Maladi, Bandivade-Koil, Masure, Tondavali-

Talashil, Wayangani-Kalavali,  
Revandi, Malwan (Dhuriwada,  
Medha, Bazarpeth, Dandi),  
Sarjekot, Kolamb, Miryabanda,  
Wayari, Tarkarli-Devbag, Varad.

Vengurla Taluka : Dabhoswada, Wayangani, Vengurla  
City, Navabag, Ubhadanda, Muth,  
Bande, Tank, Aronda, Redi, Kalavi,  
Kelus, Malai, Khavane, Kochre-  
Sriramwadi, Shelapi-Nivati, Shiroda,  
Mochemad-Girapwadi,.

Kudal Taluka : Kasal, Kavathi, Sarmbal, Chedvan-  
Gabitwadi.

(Note: For Taluka-wise Maps, See Appendix B.)

Gabit locality in some villages like Chedvan, Tal. Kudal; is referred to as Gabitwadi.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, some Gabit settlements are identified with specific names such as Achara-Pirawadi, Nadan-Virwadi, etc. Most of these settlements have a temple, a primary school, at least one retail shop and a meeting place for the village gathering. Due to local efforts and government financial assistance, attention is now provided toward roads, sanitation and drainage.

### **3.1.3. Housing, Cuisine and Clothing**

Old houses in Gabit localities are either masonry walled, mud-walled or *khop* (hut),<sup>5</sup> having a roof covered

with terracotta tiles - *Nali* or Mangalori. Old large houses usually have *Mangar* (Storeroom). New and renovated houses are slab-built with *Chira* (Laterite Stone). Cow dung is used to smear the floor and *Khala* (front area). Each house has either Mango, Jackfruit, Cashew, Banana or Coconut Tree in its surrounding.



**Figure 2: *Mangar* of Author's Ancestral Home, at Maladi, Tal. Malwan**

(Credits: Mr. Bhalchandra Paradkar)

Generally, a Gabit house is divided into four sections - *Padavi* (Outer balcony), *Valay* (Central Hall), *Chulichho Khan* (Kitchen) and *Devghar* (God's place).<sup>6</sup> Nylon fishing nets, *Paag* can be observed hanging on the wall of the houses engaged in fishing. In *Valay*, *Devachi Bhint* is decorated with floral designs and/or Hindu religious symbols. *Ganpatichi Mathi* is tied on this wall where the Ganpati image is placed and

worshipped during *Ganeshotsav*. Its adjoining wall is *Nagobachi Bhint* with a Snake image. On Nag Panchami the family performs Nag Pooja under it.



**Figure 3: *Devachi* and *Nagobachi Bhint* in *Valay*, Author's Ancestral Home**

(Credits: Mr. Bhalchandra Paradkar)

Rice, Fish Curry and Rice/Ragi Bhakri are the main components of the Gabit diet. For breakfast they usually have *Pej* or *Ambil*.<sup>7</sup> *Kokam* and *Malwani Masala* are the main ingredients in the cuisine. *Pithi*, *Solkadhi*, *Tomato and Kokam Saar*, Black Peas *Usal* and *Ghavan/Amboli*, *Saguti* (Chicken Curry) and *Vade* are popular dishes among Gabits. *Soji*, *Modak*, *Patolya* and *Rasatil Shevya* are sweet dishes made on occasions. Black tea is a popular beverage and Liquor is drunk in moderation.<sup>8</sup>

Gabit men wear simple cotton shirts and trousers during travel and on occasions.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise, they wear

banians and half pants. Gabit Women prefer simple clothing - *lugada*, *patal* of six to nine yards, simple ornaments like bangles, *Nath*, *Mangalsutra*, *Jodvi*, and *Painjan*.<sup>10</sup> on the forehead bold kumkum is applied. tshirts and Jeans, salwar-kurta, etc. are preferred by the young generation.

#### **3.1.4. Economic Life of a Gabit (19<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> Century) : Continuity and Change**

Agriculture alone can't be a way of life in Konkan due to its peculiar geographical position and thus Konkani Communities have seemed to have relied on other economic activities since ancient times. The sturdy middle-sized physic of Gabits has enabled them to engage in labor-intensive activities that helped them to engage in maritime activities like sea-fishing, sailing, and boatbuilding along with agriculture.<sup>11</sup>

##### **A) Agriculture and Fishing**

Gabits from interior parts (*valati*) are engaged in Agriculture as landowners or labourers. They cultivate rice, ragi, groundnuts, sesame, *Udid*, and black pepper and vegetables on small scale. families with landholdings are focusing on Alphonso mango, cashew and coconut cultivation. Fishing relieved the pressure of the population on land to a great extent by supplying an alternative source of employment in Konkan. as noted in official records, Gabit fishermen from Southern Konkan used to sail south as far as malpe and mangalore in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with a

flotilla of keeled and outrigger sailing boats in search of seer, pomfret, catfish, shark (dogfish) and other big fishes.<sup>12</sup>

Today Gabits have relatively a little stake in the fish trade of the region due to their focus on small-scale fishing. A tendency still prevails to look down upon fishing as an acquired occupation adopted at large after the fall of the Maratha Navy.<sup>13</sup> Around 30% members of the community are engaged in fishing at present.<sup>14</sup> Boats - *Machava* and *Hodi* and Fishing Boat Launches are used individually or in partnership. *Rapan* is a traditional fishing technique that is still prevalent in the community. Efforts like Co-operative Fishing associations in some villages are appreciable but haven't borne much fruits in the age of rising competition and climate change.<sup>15</sup>



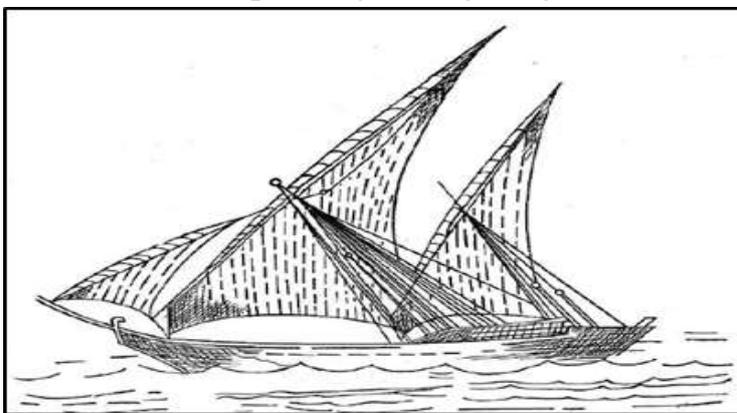
**Figure 4: Rapan, a traditional fishing method in Southern Konkan**

*(Source: Author's Personal Collection)*

## **B) Boatbuilding, Marine and Riverine Logistics**

Gabits were assistants of *Panchkalashis* at Malwan port in boatbuilding activities.<sup>16</sup> *Phatemari*, *Galbat* and *Machava* Boats were preferred for marine and riverine activities - both fishing and transport. Wealthier families among Gabits owned freight vessels that used to sail from Karachi in North to Cochin in South.<sup>17</sup> As the community gained local importance, others were employed as a captain or sailors.<sup>18</sup>

a News dated January 22, 1877 published in *Dnyan Prakash*, a Marathi newspaper helps to recover how Gabits were involved in Marine Cargo service understand the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>19</sup> On December 31, 1876, a *Phatemari* with a cargo of paddy left from Bombay to Malabar. It had few passengers alighting at Achara Port.



**Figure 5: *Phatemari* on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Konkan Coast.**

Grab-built in nature, it was the best freight ship with carriage capacity of 20 - 100 tons.

(Source: B. K. Apte, *A History of The Maratha Navy and Merchantships*, pp. 150-151.)

Despite resistance, Arab and *Siddi* pirates plundered the crew on the ship near Purnagad near in the night ratnagiri and took the booty of around 250 rupees. *Phatemari* was owned by Yesu Raghu Gabit, a resident of the Munage village of Malwan Taluka (now in Devgad Taluka).

As the news indicates, coastal ports other than Bombay on Konkan coast, being the exchange houses of goods, provided Gabits a scope to engage in the carriage of goods and passengers.<sup>20</sup> chief exported items were rice, linseeds, cashew nuts, dried Kokam rinds, coir, coconuts, fishes – fresh and salted, betel nuts, and mangoes; whereas husked Rice, oil, English cloth, tiles, molasses, Tobacco and chilies were imported.<sup>21</sup>

Gabits like other seafaring communities, were a connecting link between riverine and coastal ports on the Western Coast in the British era. In post-independence years, their sailing was restrained to Konkan Coast. Ultimately Marine Logistics in Southern Konkan got collapsed with the Rohini Ship tragedy (1972) and the demise of Malvan, Devgad and Achara ports in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the boatbuilding industry lost its significance and thus Gabits' engagement in it.

### **C) Secondary and Tertiary Sectors**

Since the British era, White and Blue collared jobs in cities attracted Gabit youths. Gradually they migrated to cities like Mumbai, Pune, Panaji, Kolhapur, etc. for

better employment opportunities. Today 60% of the community is engaged in the Tertiary sectors<sup>23</sup> - Public Services, Banking, Education, Hospitality, Travel and Tourism, etc.

As skilled enough to engage in crew activities; Gabits preferred to migrate to port cities like Bombay (Mumbai) and Karachi in the British era to join lucrative jobs on those ports.<sup>24</sup> Partition closed the community's access to Karachi port and thus proved as a setback for the entire generation of Gabits.<sup>25</sup> In the post-independence years, Gabits started migrating to Mumbai in large numbers forming small pockets of Gabit localities in the city. Today Gabit localities in Mumbai Metropolitan Region are found in Lalbaug, Wadala, Kanjur-Bhandup, Mulund, Jogeshwari, Thane-Kalava and Badlapur areas.<sup>26</sup>

Gabits *Chakarmanis* in Mumbai focused on public sector jobs as they are a secure source of income amid the responsibilities of the family. Gabits, though preferred jobs in Mumbai Port Trust, Mazgaon and Naval Docks; initially, gradually established themselves in other public services-Banking, Police, Healthcare, Education, Revenue and Customs Department, Municipal Corporation, Universities, etc.<sup>27</sup> Small scale factories and shops of Malwani products are run by Gabit families. Some enthusiasts have earned their name in Business, Theatre and Cinemas as well. The list of Eminent Personalities from Gabit *Chakarmanis* in Mumbai has been provided in Appendix F.

Life of a Gabit that widely resembles *Malvani* culture, has remained *Sushegad*, simple but enthusiastic. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Gabit Community faced economic upheavals caused due to - 1) Fall of the Maratha Navy; 2) the Partition of India; and 3) the Demise of Coastal Ports in Southern Konkan in the 1970s that have influenced the contemporary economic transformation of the community. Though traditional occupations had either lost their significance or disappeared in course of time, members of the community have created their own space and achieved success in their respective fields.

## **B) A Life of a Gabit : Socio-Cultural Study**

The socio-cultural life of a community is one of the spectacles in ethnographic studies. is further gets extended Rituals and tradition in family and societal life are the significant part of Gabit's calomel lifestyle Socio-Cultural life of a Gabit and its critical study is the core of this chapter that touches its various facets – Gotra, Kula and Kulachar, Surnames, Marriage norms, Fairs and Festivals.

### **3.2.1. Gotra, Kula and Surnames in Gabit Community – Nature and Significance**

*Gotra* and *Kula* play a key role in deciding the social status of a community next to the Caste in India. Gotra is traced from one of the *Sapta Rishi* as a progenitor. As per popular notion, Gabit community has

as whole the same *Gotra*–Kashyapa.<sup>28</sup> But, few families belong to other *Gotras* as well. *Gotra*, unlike *Kula*, has remained a nominal identity in religious affairs.

*Kula* is defined as a families' cluster having common ancestry.<sup>29</sup> Gabits, like Marathas, do have *Kulas*. Some of the noted *Kulas* among Gabits are:<sup>30</sup>

Babar, Bhosale, Chavan, Dabhade, Dalvi,  
Dhamale, Ghorpade, Jadhav, Kadam, Kubal,  
More, Nikam, Pawar, Rane, Rawal, Shinde

Individuals from the same family got separated due to migration, adopted other surnames, and established their own families; but retained their links to *Kula*. For example, during the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century, two branches of the Prabhu family of Parad with some interval migrated and settled down in villages Maladi (Malvan Taluka) and Manche (Devgad Taluka).<sup>31</sup> In due course of time, they adopted surnames like Prabhu, Manchekar, Tari, Paradkar, Maladkar, Malankar, etc.; but all of them retained their link with *Kula* through *Kuladevta* Durgadevi of Parad.

As most individuals being unaware of their *Kula*, families having the same *Kuldevtas* are considered as one *Kula*. Dirbadevi-Rameshwar of Jamsande, Durgadevi of Parad, Pavnai-Ravalnath and Narayan-Sateri of Malond (Belachi Wadi), Rameshwar of Kandalgaon, Bhadrakali of Redi, Kepadevi of Mooth-Vengurla are well known *Kuladevts* as most of the Gabit families directly or indirectly are associated with either of them.



**Figure 6: Some Famous *Kuldevtas* among Gabits**

(Source: Author’s Personal Collection)

1) Dirbadevi-Rameshwar of Jamsande, 2) Kepadevi of Mooth-Vengurla, 3) Durgadevi of Parad, 4) Narayan-Sateri of Malond (Belachi Wadi), 5) Rameshwar of Kandalgaon, and 6) Bhadrakali of Redi.

Many families use their *Kula* name as their surnames. But, *Padnave*, the titles given by society; have been adopted as surnames significantly.<sup>32</sup> *Padnave* were derived from village names, occupations, nautical

designations or ancestor's names. Village name in the surnames indicates that the said village is either a place of inhabitation at present or that of origin in the past. A surname is formed by adding the suffix *kar* to the Village name or with minor changes in the same.<sup>33</sup> For example, the surnames Bapardekar and Morje are derived from village names - Baparde (Malvan) and Morjee (Goa). Families with the above surnames found in various Gabit localities claim their origin from the said villages. Thus, it seems that various Gabit families migrated from Goa and Deccan in Southern Konkan.

As engaged in the trade of *Khobre* (Dry Coconut), a branch of Mote family of Vengurla received the surname Khobrekar.<sup>34</sup> Families with rights of *Gavki* (village affairs) became 'Gaonkar,' whereas those who acquired *Mahattar* rights in the village, were known as 'Mehetar' or 'Methar.'<sup>35</sup> A branch of Rane received the surname 'Koyande' (Lock-keeper) as their ancestor Janba Rane had a responsibility to lock prison's door in Kolhapur Jail.<sup>36</sup> In this way, occupations are reflected through Surnames in Gabit Community.

Certain surnames have nautical relevance. For example, Surnames like Tandel, Sartandel, Phadtandel, Sarang, Naik were the designations in Maratha Navy. Some families adopted their ancestor's names as surnames. The surnames Dujji, Mhadnak, and Hirnaik claim their origin from Dudji Parabhu, Mhadu Naik, and Hiroji Chaugule Naik respectively who were officials in Maratha Navy.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.2.2. *Kulachar* in the Gabit Community

Members of Gabit Community visit their *Kuldevta* temples on auspicious occasions. Sati shrines in the complex of *Kuladevta* and *Gramdevta* temples are worshipped as a part of temple rituals. Sati is worshipped in form of *Devali* or *Satigal*. *Devali* is a semi-circular niche housing *Pashan* representing Sati and his husband.<sup>38</sup> *Satigal* has a sculpture of a couple sitting to worship *Shivalinga*. A hand of Sati with bangles on the wrist and outward facing palm is said to be giving blessings to her worshippers and devotees.<sup>39</sup> This highlights the prevalence of the Sati system in the community and the honor Sati used to enjoy in the society.

A coconut is installed and worshipped in *Devghar* in the name of *Mulpurush*, the progenitor of the family. It is changed with the interval of 3 or 5 years after performing *Hom*, to continue the family tree to prosper.



**Figure 7: *Hom* in Author's Ancestral House**

(Source: Author's Personal Collection)

*Javal*, the hair removal ceremony of a boy conducted during his 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> year,<sup>40</sup> is a significant event for Gabit families. It is different from *Munj*, the threading ceremony. For the propitiation of deceased ancestors, *Mahalaya* or *Mahals* are performed in *Pitru Paksha*, the last fortnight of Bhadrapada month.

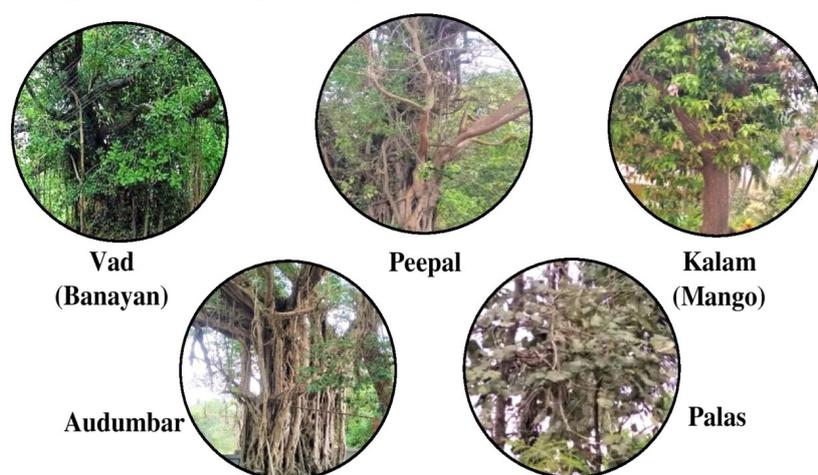
### **3.2.3. Marriage Norms in Gabit Community**

Gabit Community is predominantly an endogamous group; hence Caste Endogamy with some restrictions is still preferred in the community. Social evils like Child Marriage and Polygamy were prevalent in the community; but, the community was progressive enough to allow *Kadimod* (Divorce) and *Paat Lavne* (Widow Remarriage).<sup>41</sup>

Certain marriage norms have a stronghold over Gabits' mindset. The sameness of *Kula* and Surnames bars intermarriage to maintain lineage exogamy.<sup>42</sup> But, it is inapplicable in the case of same *Gotra* and *Devak*. A member of the caste can marry a daughter of his *Mama* (Mother's brother), but not a daughter of his *Aatya* (Father's Sister). Even descendants of sisters cannot remarry within three degrees of relationship.<sup>43</sup>

Gabits like Marathas install *Devak* (A Marriage Guardian) at the commencement of the marriage. *Devaks* are mainly trees - *Kalamb*, *Pangara*, *Audumbar*, *Vad*, *Peepal*, Mango, *Palas* and/or *Panchpallavi*, leaves of five trees - *Peepal*, *Kalam*, *Vad*, *Audumbar*, *Palas*.<sup>44</sup>

The *Devak* tradition appears to be totemistic in nature. A Gabit respects their *Devak* and *Panchpallavi* by not cutting or burning the wood of trees or removing their leaves except on auspicious occasions.



**Figure 8: Panchpallavi (*Devaks* among Gabits)**

(Credits: Mr. Bhalchandra Paradkar)

The custom of Dowry is not prevalent; but if the bride's family is poor, the boy's father helps him by giving *dyaj*.<sup>45</sup> Although little in ratio, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages are observed among Gabit families with the spread of progressive ideas. Late marriages are observed in the community due to economic instability and other family responsibilities.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2.4. Fairs and Festivals

Gabits are fond of fairs and festivals like their Konkani counterparts. Firmly entrenched in Hinduism and

its sects – *Shaiva*, *Vaishnava* - Varkari and Ramdasi, and *Datta*; the community celebrates all major Hindu festivals such as Gudi Padwa, Ram Navami, Naga Panchami, Narali Purnima, Gokula Ashtami, Ganeshotsav, Navratri, Dussehra, Diwali and Holi. In this list, Holi (*Shigma*) has its significance.

Gabit Community from the villages located near the sea coast and river creeks - Vijaydurg, Girye, Mond, Achara, Sarjekot, etc., celebrates *Shigma* (Holi) with their peculiarities in rituals and traditions.<sup>47</sup> Hence, it is widely known as *Gabit Shigmotsav*. *Gabit Shigmotsav* at Vijaydurg probably received its grandeur under the patronage of Sarkhel Angres and Subedar Dhulaps.<sup>48</sup> Gradually Gabits from other villages may have adopted the Vijaydurg tradition with their own features.

The *Phaag*, the Holi folk songs performed on the rhythm of *Ghumat* is a center of attraction during *Shigmotsav*. Young men dress like a young married lady to play a *Songa* (role) of *Kolin* or *Radha* to perform across the village houses. The *Phaags* are based on Ramayana and Mahabharata except two among them. The *Phaag* ‘*Vijaydurg Nagari Ho...*’ (This is Vijaydurg Town) while providing the picturesque description of Vijaydurg fort and town, enables a listener to imagine the glory of Vijaydurg in the Maratha regime.<sup>49</sup> Another *Phaag* ‘*Ingrajancha Halla*’ (The British Attack on Vijaydurg) narrates how the Maratha garrison in Vijaydurg

defeated the British Navy which had attacked on the auspicious day of *Dussehra*.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 9: Performance of *Phaags* in Girye-Bandewadi during Shigmotsav 2024**

(Credits: Mrs. Madhura Gaonkar)

An Extract from the *Phaag* ‘*Vijaydurg Nagari Ho...*’

विजयदुर्ग नगरी होऽ विजयदुर्ग नगरी होऽ  
विजयदुर्ग नगरी की डंका गर्जे चौबंदरीऽ  
अहो गर्जे चौबंदरी, की डंका गर्जे चौबंदरी होऽ

किल्ला बांधिला संबूर होऽ नेस्तावरीऽ  
बांधिला संबूर होऽ नेस्तावरीऽ  
आणि हो वेऽताळ आहे किल्ल्याच्या दरीवजा भूतूर होऽ

राऽमलिंग महाराज होऽ राऽमलिंग महाराज गाऽ  
देऽऊळ बांधिलेऽ खोऽरीतऽ देऽऊळ बांधिलेऽ खोऽरीतऽ  
बांधिलेऽ खोऽरीतऽ की आंगरा राव आहे त्याच्या बाजूऽसऽ

**Translation:**

*This is the Vijaydurg town whose fame is spread across four ports (Surat, Bombay, Goa and Calicut).*

*The Fort had been constructed on the peninsula and Vetal resides in its door.*

*The Temple of Ramlinga Maharaj (Rameshwar) is built in a shallow valley. Angre Rao (Sarkhel Sambhaji Angre) rests next to him.*

(Source: Ramesh Kubal, and Ankush Sarang,  
*Konkancha Gabit Shigmotsav*, p. 54.)

The *Phaag* performances end with paying *Salaam* (a customary salute) to both Hindus and Muslims present there. Thus, *Shigma* is a festival that incorporates all castes and religions and thus underlines socio-religious harmony. Interestingly, Gabit Community of Konkan abstains from bringing Gaurai with Ganpati at home due to a prevailing folklore. There are two versions of folklore. One version argues that their Gaurai were found in fishnets during fishing after immersion in the past, led to this tradition. Another one states that tigers took off Gaurai's image during a festival night in the past. Hence, unlike other coastal communities, they adhere to this practice, rooted in their unique cultural beliefs and respect for past memories. Gabits enthusiastically participate in the annual *Hari Nam Saptah* as well organised at the village deity's temple.<sup>51</sup> They are fond of *Dashavatar*, the dramas based on Puranic stories. Gabits have faith in the existence of supernatural powers and thus superstitions still prevail in the society creating a suspicious atmosphere in families and society sometimes.<sup>52</sup>

The study of *Kula* and surnames reveals that the history of the Gabit Community is the history of migration and socio-economic dynamism in Southern Konkan. Caste endogamy among Gabits has maintained unity based on blood relations.<sup>53</sup> Religiosity among Gabits has continued the age-old rituals; but has patronaged superstitions as well. Carrying ahead with simplicity, the

traditions that received patronage from Angres and Dhulaps, *Shigmotsav* provides Gabit Community an occasion to recollect the glorious history of the ancestors through *Phaags* making it an intangible maritime heritage of Southern Konkan.

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5. V. A. Deshmukh, *The Gabits: Sea-farers of the Konkan Coast*, p. 160.

6. Ramesh Kubal, *Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Maratha Gharanyancha Itihas*, p. 140.

7. *Mr. Murlidhar Joshi* (Social Activist and Founder Member, Taramumbri Co-operative Fishing Society), Interview by Author (Google Meet), Devgad, February 03, 2024. *Pej* is a porridge of boiled rice and *Ambil* is that of Ragi or Vari flour.

8. V. A. Deshmukh, *The Gabits: Sea-farers of the Konkan Coast*, p. 160.

9. *Mr. Murlidhar Joshi*, Interview by Author, February 03, 2024.

10. *Ibid.*

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## Chapter IV

# Gabit as a Social Identity : Past and Present

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### 4.1. Gabits in British Official Records: Pirates to Fishermen

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Maratha naval powers in Southern Konkan – Angres of Vijaydurg, Sindhudurg Fleet under Karavirkar Chhatrapatis, and Sawants of Wadi harassed the British and Portuguese with their ‘piratical’ activities. State-sponsored piracy was an equally honorable occupation in the Maratha regime as it was an essential source of income for the State.<sup>1</sup> Gabits predominantly residents of Salshi, Malond, Masura, Vengurla, Kudal and Bande *tarfs*; were recruited as naval crew with other communities. Though there is no specific mention of Gabits, the naval crew was referred to with certain terms used for their masters – *Sevagee*, *Malwans* and *Kempsaunts* respectively by Europeans.<sup>2</sup>

British noted Gabits as ‘Gauptee,’ a fishermen caste in the 1812 Census conducted after the acquisition of the Malwan region from Kolhapur State.<sup>3</sup> Almost all British official records followed the same narrative describing them as fishmongers.<sup>4</sup> Some narratives suspected Gabits were of Aboriginal origin.<sup>5</sup> The Ethnographic Survey of

India Monograph on the community based on empirical study argued that Gabits, were of Maratha origin that can be observed through their rituals and traditions; and that got isolated from Marathas after adopting fishing as an occupation.<sup>6</sup>

Census Reports since 1881 mentioned Gabit or Gapit as a separate Caste in the Bombay Presidency.<sup>7</sup> Leaders from the Gabit community were unsatisfied with the British narrative about the term Gabit and thus opposed to publish Epigraphic Survey Monograph in Enthoven's Volume.<sup>8</sup> Due to their instance, the 1921 Census included Gabits as an allied caste of Maratha-Kunbi after the campaign led by Community leaders.<sup>9</sup> However, the segregation of Gabit as a separate 'Backward' Caste in the revised classification of 1934 led to an interesting episode in the history of the gabit community.

#### **4.2. Gabits – Backward or Intermediate? (1939-1946)**

Mr. Savlaram Balaji Kubal, then-Secretary of Vengurla Konkani Maratha Sangh, filed a petition in September 1939 to rename Gabit Caste as 'Konkani Maratha,' an Intermediate Caste as the Community was not willing to enjoy the benefits of Backward Class.<sup>10</sup> He rejected 'mistaken' British interpretations that tend to group Gabits with nomadic, depressed and aboriginal castes and, argued that the term 'Gabit' denotes occupation and not the Caste.<sup>11</sup> The 'Fishermen' identity

was imposed on Gabits after adopting fishing - a 'low' occupation after the demise of the Maratha Navy, and thus they got isolated from Marathas.

Mr. Kubal emphasized that as Gabits had been relegating themselves as *Maratha Kshatriya* as he observed in the titles of their associations; they should be allowed to adopt the identity 'Konkani Maratha' officially and enjoy concessions granted to Konkani Marathas.

Such a petition was a first of its kind in the Bombay Presidency where a caste group demanded upgradation and not downgradation as prominently highlighted in the Departmental Notes.<sup>12</sup> To determine whether the Gabit had progressed enough to enter in Intermediate Caste Category, the Bombay Government (GOB) asked for opinions from – 1) Backward Classes Officer, Poona (Pune); 2) GOB Education Department and 3) Collectorates of Ratnagiri and Kanara Districts.

Backward Classes Officer (BCO) recommended to reclassify Gabit of Southern Konkan as Intermediate Caste. Gabits from Southern Konkan had achieved better in the terms of literacy and public services compared to Kunbi and Dhanagar - other Intermediate Castes from Southern Konkan.<sup>13</sup> Gabits from Kanara District due to their backward socio-economic and educational conditions wished to remain under Backward Category. As Education Department emphasized, Gabit pupils could

be entitled to the freeships Marathas were availed of in primary and secondary education, if renamed Konkani Maratha.<sup>14</sup>

District Collector of Ratnagiri pointed out that though Konkani Marathas had no objection to reclassification, they clearly opposed to rename Gabits as Konkani Marathas and providing them educational and public services concessions granted to Marathas.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Gabits in Southern Konkan were unanimous on the reclassification as most of the Gabits from the Ratnagiri-Devgad Region desired to be retained in the Backward class, whereas Gabits from Malvan-Vengurla Region wished to change in nomenclature as Konkani Maratha while remaining in Backward Class.<sup>16</sup> Such confusion was also reflected in Mr. Kubal's another petition submitted meanwhile in 1941:<sup>17</sup>

My request was not for a change of classification but for a change in the caste name itself...I therefore pray and earnestly hope that... (Government) grant my request by issuing orders for the change of caste name Gabit to Konkani Maratha without disturbing its present classification as backward.

Though Gabits had more matriculates and public servants than other Intermediates, while highlighting their socio-economic backwardness; the Collector of Ratnagiri

recommended to retain them under Backward Class. Similarly, as it would be misleading and confusing to classify the same Caste Konkani Maratha under two different categories; GOB rejected Mr. Kubal's appeal to rename the Caste name Gabit as Konkani Maratha and retained Gabit under Backward Class. Though gone in vain, this entire episode raised certain questions on Caste classification and privileges associated with it in the British era.

#### **4.3. Caste as an 'Identity' and Struggle of Gabits: A Study**

Caste is a highly involuted quality size form of ethnic ranking shaped by the constant exercise of social economic power in South Asia.<sup>18</sup> Its significance in the Census increased focus on 'recognition' of Caste by the Government Official apparatus than its disappearance as aimed by anti-caste movements in 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century India.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Caste seemed to become stronger than ever as the principal mechanism to mobilize new political identities and strategies.

M. N. Srinivas argued that the Caste mainly existed and functioned as a sub-regional system that further got divided into dozen or more endogamous groups within every region creating caste Stratums in the caste cluster.<sup>20</sup> These groupings were mostly influenced by occupations and economic status. 'Caste Maratha' though seems like a homogenous identity, has had 'economic' groupings

like Vanis, Sutars, Sonars, Parits, Kunbis, Deshmukhs.<sup>21</sup> Colonial masters acknowledged heterogeneity within Maratha, a National Caste; but neglected how caste has been shaped by the regional history of economic and political processes especially in the case of Gabits. Hence, the community saw the Fishermen identity as an imposed one and was not accepted on a wider scale due to 'Maratha' consciousness. It was reflected in Gabit Community's appeal in the 1920s emphasizing to accept of Gabit as a Caste Stratum in the National Caste 'Maratha,' although their Kshatriya identity was vanished from public memory narrating them as mere Fishermen.

Mr. Kubal's petition was a step ahead to avail the privileges enjoyed by Marathas for Gabits, being an allied caste of Maratha-Kunbi. The relevance of demand could be realized with changing caste dynamics in the 1930s. The colonial notion of a Caste, like Social Darwinism, relates each group with its occupational quality and hierarchical position in the society; and cultural features it adhered to.<sup>22</sup> Revised Classification of 1934 divided Indian Castes into three categories – Advanced, Intermediate, and Backward and made Caste an essential criterion to provide educational concessions and reservation in public services.<sup>23</sup> Around 60% of clerical positions were reserved for Intermediates as compared to 10% to that for Backward in Southern Division of Bombay province from where Gabit Community belonged

to.<sup>24</sup> The inclusion of Gabits in Konkani Maratha could have opened the opportunities on a wider scale. The unanimity among Gabits themselves on the issue indicates that the demand was a wish of educated creamy layers among Gabits seeking jobs in Subordinate Services.

Opposition from Konkani Marathas to provide educational concessions and public services quotas highlighted fault lines within the Maharashtrian Non-Brahmanical Movement. Gabit, though an allied caste of Marathas in Census Reports and Provincial Electoral Rolls, was not entitled to freeships enjoyed by Konkani Maratha pupils since 1921 in primary and secondary schools. Inclusion in Backward Class provided quintessential educational concessions but narrowed their path to enter in Public Services. In 1939, Gabits had a relatively better literacy rate (22.5%) than other intermediate castes – Konkani Marathas (10%) and many of them were clerks and Talathis in government jobs, but the major section in the community was not competent enough to face competition due to their backward socio-economic conditions.<sup>25</sup> Opposition to allow Gabits to enjoy ‘concessions’ required to uplift them, raised a question mark on the soul of the Movement – Justice for all.

#### **4.4. Gabit as a Social Identity in Contemporary Era (1955 onwards)**

Kakasaheb Kalelkar Commission was the first attempt in post-independent India to survey OBCs. It

categorized Gabit as a Most Backward Community.<sup>26</sup> But, the reservation benefits were received only after the implementation of the Mandal Commission report in 1992. Mr. Sharad Dighe, a Member of Parliament put a Private Member's Bill on the tables of the Lok Sabha in 1986 to include sub-tribes of Kolis from Maharashtra including 'Gabit Koli' in the Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order, 1950.<sup>27</sup> However some of the Gabit leaders requested Government of Maharashtra not to issue ST Certificates to Gabits by considering them synonymous with Castes Gavit/Gamit.<sup>28</sup>

Today Gabit Caste is included in OBC at the Central level and in SBC at the State level. Members of the community have been availed of benefits in admissions to educational institutions, public services recruitment and promotions. But in these years, the Maratha consciousness has overshadowed the identity of Gabit as it is losing its importance within the community. As Mr. Kolambakar has narrated, many people, like his parents, feel ashamed of Gabit identity and thus try to hide the identity.<sup>29</sup> Since the 20th century, it is observed that various social associations associated with Gabit Community have closed down, except Maratha Kshatriya Vidyavardhak Mandal, Mumbai established in 1917.<sup>30</sup> The association provides monetary help to poor meritorious students from the community. Gabit Samaj Sansthas in Mumbai have not been able to gain support from Gabit *Chakarmanis* due to unawareness and lack of continuity.



**Figure 10: Gabit Samaj Bhavan,  
Kanjur-Bhandup East, Mumbai**

(Credits: Mr. Ganesh Phadke,  
Chairman, Gabit Samaj Sanstha)

#### **4.5. Dr. Ramesh Kubal and Rewriting of History of Gabit Community**

In 1983, the Gabit community's history was redefined with the publication of 'Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Gharanyancha Itihas' by Dr. Ramesh Kubal, commissioned by the Kshatriya Kulavatans Aarmari Maratha Samaj, Mumbai. This extensive study covered the historical journey of the Gabit community along India's Western Coast, from Ratnagiri to Honavar. By surveying 94 families, the book presented a comprehensive socio-economic history, moving beyond caste-centric narratives to emphasize the broader identity of the Gabits.

Dr. Kubal positioned Gabits within the Maratha caste, focusing on their naval heritage linked to the Gurab

warship. He argued that the term 'Gabit' emerged in medieval times, distinguishing them from ancient fishing communities like the Bhoi and Mogor. He traced their lineage to Rajput-Maratha families, supported by rituals, historical documents from 1564 CE, and temple inscriptions. Kubal countered Enthoven's argument equating Kharvi and Gabits, highlighting the impact of Portuguese expansion on Gabit migration to Konkan. Through detailed family case studies, he examined how occupation influenced identity. Kubal emphasized the Gabits' integral role in the Maratha community, advocating for a unified identity as *Aarmari Kshatriya* (Naval Warriors) and challenging societal stigmas. His work remains a significant scholarly reevaluation of Gabit history, promoting pride and unity within the community.

Caste identity became more pronounced in colonial times, especially in defining societal 'backwardness.' A constructivist approach helps grasp these complexities. Nicholas Dirks highlights that colonial India saw caste as a key aspect of civil society, solidifying previously fluid community boundaries.<sup>31</sup> Dipesh Chakraborty argues that despite colonial textualization, overlapping ethnic identities persisted, prompting many 'middle' societal groups to claim Kshatriya status, including Gabits.<sup>32</sup> Unlike other groups, Gabits lacked unified efforts toward this goal. While some protested, it didn't become a widespread movement. Paradoxically, despite maintaining Maratha

consciousness, many Gabits disparaged their own identity. The colonial textualization both constructed and destructed, rewriting history and deepening internal divisions within the community.

As V. A. Deshmukh has underlined, disunity and unawareness are the major hinderances in the path of the Gabit Community,<sup>33</sup> to strengthen its identity on a wider platform in contemporary times as well. Meager response to data collection drive in both urban and rural areas, for the revised edition of Dr. Kubal's treatise under Akhil Bharatiya Gabit Mahasangh in 2021 highlighted the same.<sup>34</sup> Such an inferiority complex needs to be overcome.

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## Chapter V Conclusion

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**J**ames A. Garfield has well said that Geography and Chronology are the two eyes of History. Geography creates a niche for the historical event to happen at a particular location, whereas Chronology sets the specific time for the same. The topography of Konkan provided a niche for coastal communities to adapt maritime skills for survival, whereas historical events in due course of time shaped their life with the principle - Continuity and Change. The Geography of Southern Konkan and the Chronology of historical events in the region during the last three Centuries molded the journey of Gabit Community as a Maritime Community of Southern Konkan.

Well known for their sailing skills, Gabit Community received momentum in the era of the Maratha Navy (17<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> Century) to explore various facets of Maritime activities – Sailing, Shipbuilding and their maintenance, so much so that the term ‘Gabit’ became synonymous to the crew on Gurab, the Maratha warship. During its transition from *Daryavardi* to *Gurabitandels*, Gabits must have polished their traditional seafaring and engineering skills to become the driving force behind

*Gurabs*. After the demise of the Maratha Navy, Ships of Gabits, through the carriage of goods and passengers, became one of the connecting links between the hinterland and coastal ports in Southern Konkan till the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Meanwhile, expertise in maritime activities provided them a space in port activities in Karachi and Mumbai. Partition (1947) closed the doors of Karachi forever, and members of the community explored other fields in urban Mumbai. Meanwhile, the fall of coastal trade and transport in Southern Konkan by the 1970s reduced Gabits' involvement in maritime activities. At present, the maritime engagement of Gabits has got limited to Dockyard and Customs Department Services in Mumbai, and fishing and boat building to some extent in Southern Konkan.

Though ambiguity remains about the origin of the term Gabit, the socio-cultural traditions help answer the unsolved questions about the community. *Kula* and Surnames among Gabits indicate the assimilation process of 'Maratha' families with a heterogeneous background in terms of occupations and places of origin migrated to Southern Konkan. Hence, it will be not an exaggeration to say that the early history of the Gabit Community is the history of 'migration.' Endogamy with some restrictions brought those immigrants closer to the identity 'Gabit.' Today Gabits while retaining their cultural practices conservatively; are adapting various progressive changes to cope up with the time.

It seems that Gabits always felt insulting of the 'Fishermen' identity and claimed their Maratha *Kshatriya* status in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. 'Maratha' consciousness among Gabit Community is a two-sided coin. It provided a cause for unity initially in the 1920s; but gradually it developed a tendency to look down upon the term 'Gabit' itself that prevails even today. By making the term Gabit synonymous with *Aarmari Maratha*, the community has narrowed its identity only to Maratha Naval activities neglecting their ancestors' role in sailing and trade till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. This identity should be widened as a Maritime community to provide due justice to them. Inferiority complex among 'Gabit' as an identity and disunity among the members didn't allow the community to continue the legacy of institutionalized efforts for community development in the post-independence era, except for few examples. Today there is no major social institution that owes its existence to the community, and others are working with negligible mass support.

To overcome the disunity and strengthen the feeling of co-operativism, the young generation needs to come ahead for institutionalized efforts from the local level. These associations should become knowledge centers providing guidance to community members for the adoption of modern technology for optimum use of resources. Cooperative movements at the local level will enable the community to use resources available to it in

an optimum manner in fishing, tourism and other agriculture allied activities. Though the community's reliance on fishing has reduced significantly in the last 50 years, Mechanized sea-fishing and Pisciculture have the potential to generate employment opportunities. Food and fish processing units should be set up to create various products from them and thus increase their market value. Initiatives like Mangrove Conservation, and Turtle Conservation can be associated with Eco-tourism.

Gabits, being the subordinate to other *Sardars*, didn't find their significant place in royal correspondence in the Medieval era. Research in local histories will be useful to overcome the lacuna. The contribution of Gabits to the development of Karachi port is still untouched and neglected. The Community has lost various historical evidence due to neglect towards the preservation of old documents and remnants of history like *Virgals*, *Satigals*, and Cannon Guns in the temple complexes. There is a need to create a repository of historical evidence such as Family Records, and *Kuladevta* temples' documents as it will enable researchers to throw light on unknown facets of the history of the Gabit Community as well as the regional history of Southern Konkan.

Gabits strived hard to maintain their maritime identity while facing upheavals caused due to the fall of the Maratha Navy and Partition of India, and gradually urbanization and the demise of coastal ports of Southern

Konkan by the 1970s narrowed their maritime engagements to fishing at present. Members of the community have falsified the proverb *Bhatak Tarava Gabytak Gorava Kuni Sangali?* by achieving success in their respective fields, but the said proverb will always remind next generations of their ancestors' story as a 'Maritime Community' of Southern Konkan in the part.

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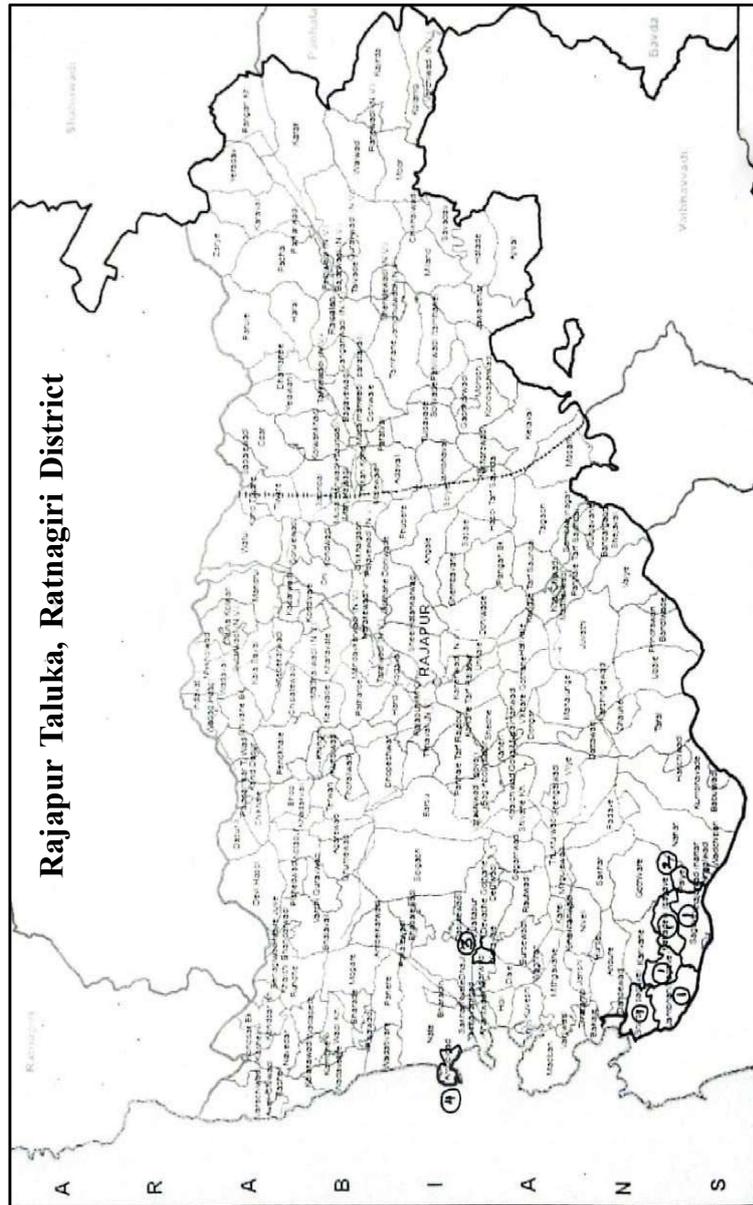
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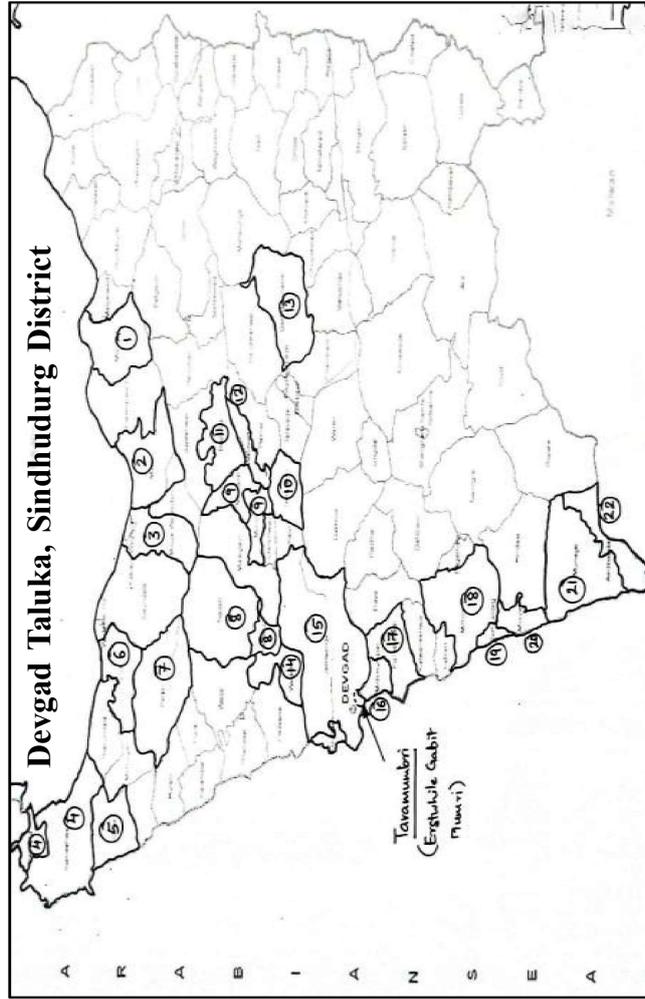
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# Appendices

- A. Reference Books on Gabit Community
- B. Gabit Localities - Taluka Wise Maps
- C. Major Centres of Naval Activities in Southern Konkan during 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century
- D. The Phaag '*Ingrajancha Halla*'
- E. Remnants of Gabit Community's Military Career
- F. Eminent Personalities from Gabit *Chakarmanis* in Mumbai

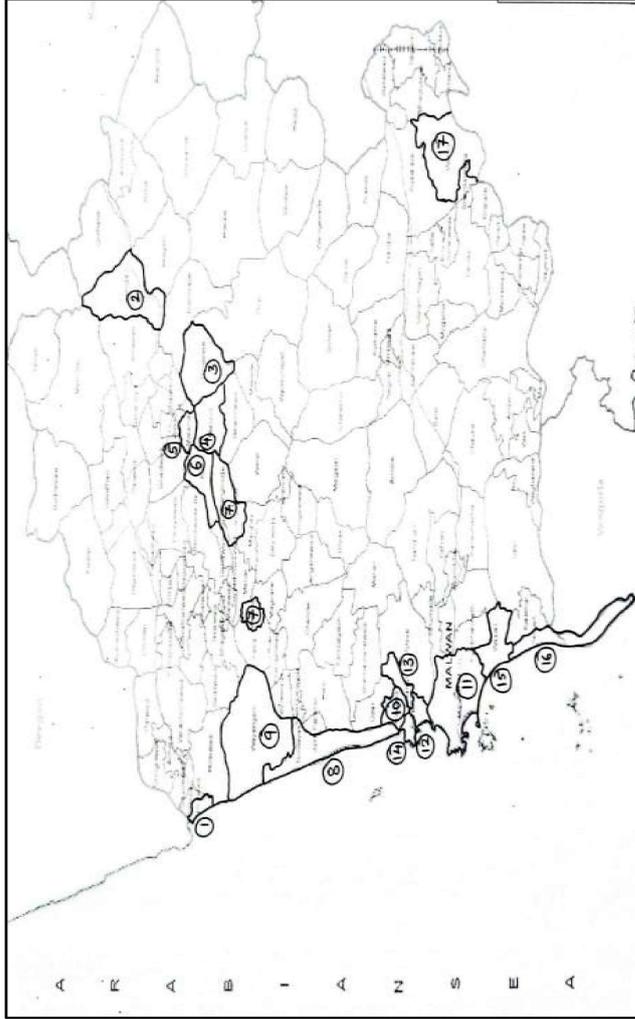


**Villages:** 1) Sagave (Shirse, Katradevi, Jambhari), 2) Palaye, 3) Juve Jaitapur, 4) Ambolgad.



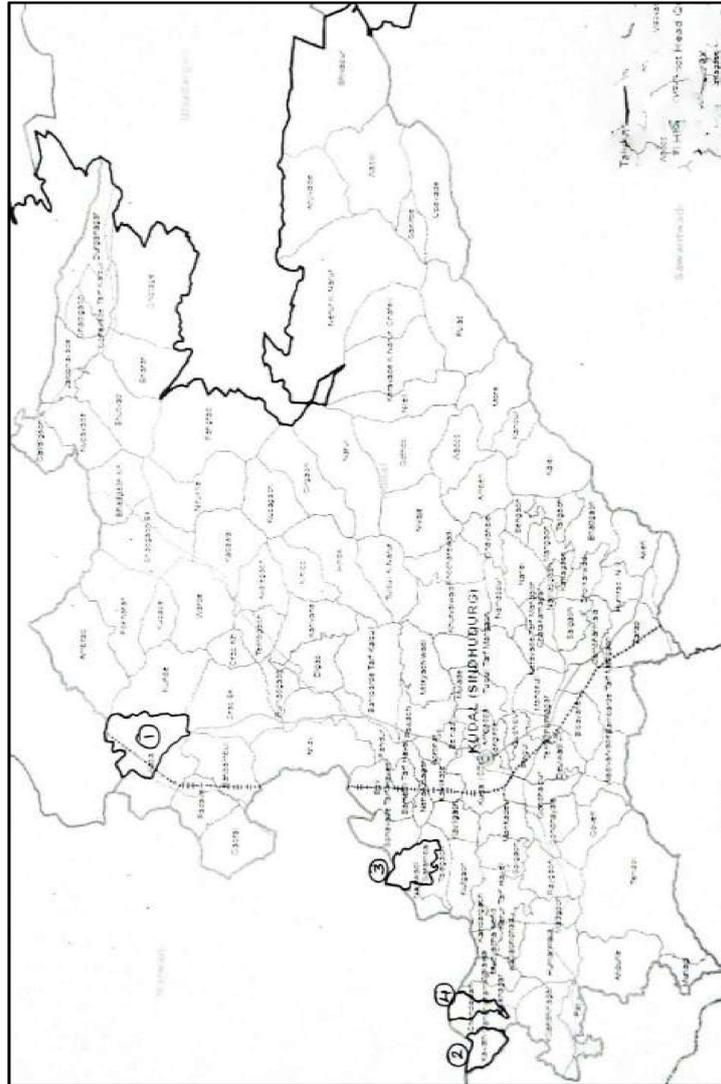
**Villages:** 1) Manche, 2) Vaghotan, 3) Mutat, 4) Vijaydurg, 5) Girye-Bande, 6) Trilot-Amberi, 7) Padel, 8) Nadan-Virwadi, 9) Mond-Mondtar, 10) Tembhvali, 11) Baparde, 12) Wanivade, 13) Gaditamhane, 14) Wadatar, 15) Devgad-Jamsande (Taramumbri, Devgad Fort, Devgad Sada, Kankhol, Anandwadi), 16) Mithmumbri, 17) Kunkeshwar, 18) Mithbaon-Dahibaon, 19) Tambaldeg, 20) Morve, 21) Munage, 22) Aadbandar.

## Malwan Taluka, Sindhudurg District



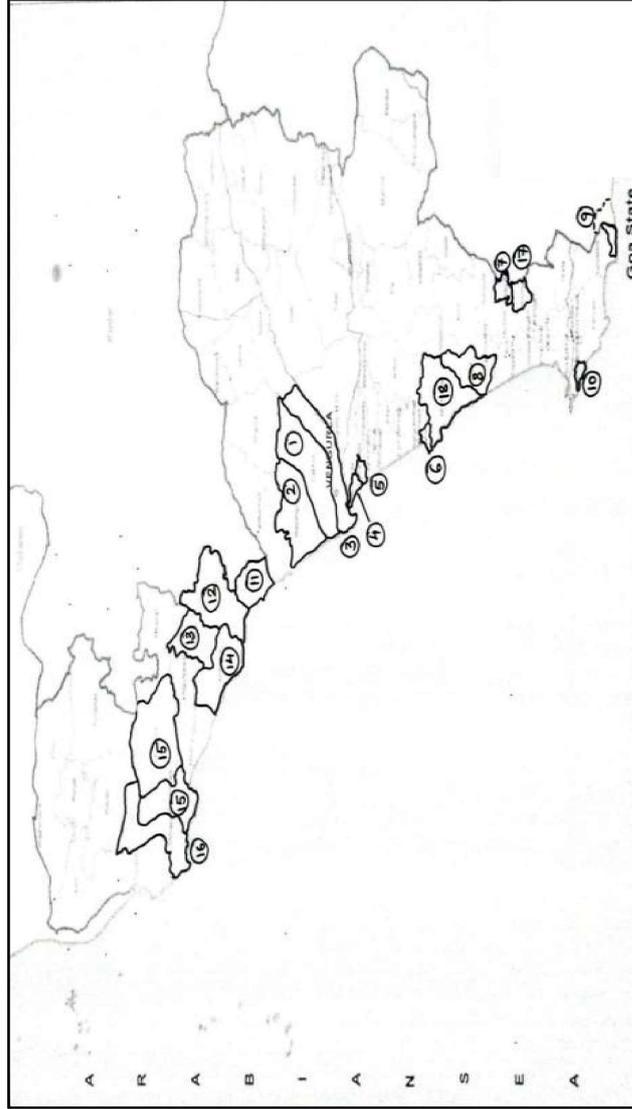
**Villages:** 1) Achara-Pirawadi, 2) Belne-Ramgad, 3) Chunvare, 4) Malond, 5) Maladi, 6) Bandivade-Koil, 7) Masure, 8) Tondavali-Talashil, 9) Wayangani-Kalavali, 10) Revandi, 11) Malwan (Dhuriwada, Medha, Bazarpeth, Dandi), 12) Sarjekot, 13) Kolamb, 14) Miryabanda, 15) Wayari, 16) Tarkarli-Devbag, 17) Varad.

## Kudal Taluka, Sindhudurg District



**Villages: 1) Kasal, 2) Kavathi, 3) Sarmbal, 4) Chedvan-Gabitwadi.**

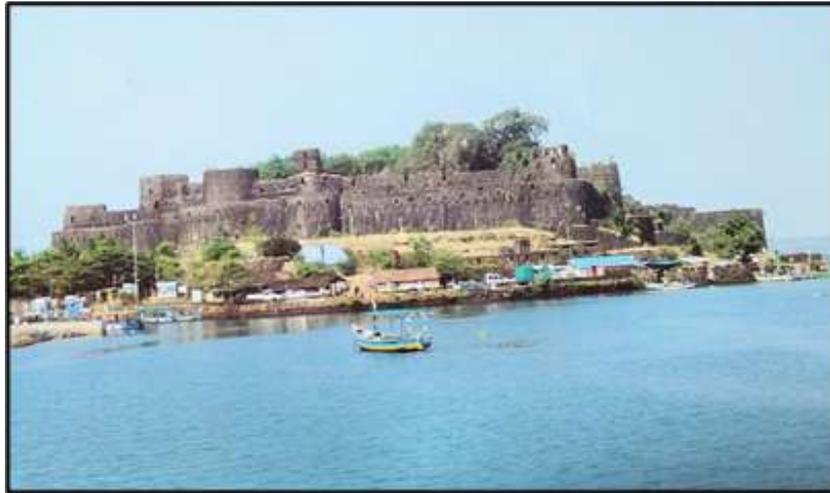
## Vengurla Taluka, Sindhudurg District



**Villages:** 1) Dabhoswada, 2) Wayangani, 3) Vengurla City, 4) Navabag, 5) Ubhadanda, 6) Muth, 7) Bande, 8) Tank, 9) Aronda, 10) Redi, 11) Kalavi, 12) Kelus, 13) Malai, 14) Khavane, 15) Kochre-Sriramwadi, 16) Shelapi-Nivati, 17) Shiroda, 18) Mochemad-Girapwadi

## Appendix C

### Major Centres of Naval Activities in Southern Konkan during 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century



**Figure 13: Vijaydurg Fort, Devgad Taluka**

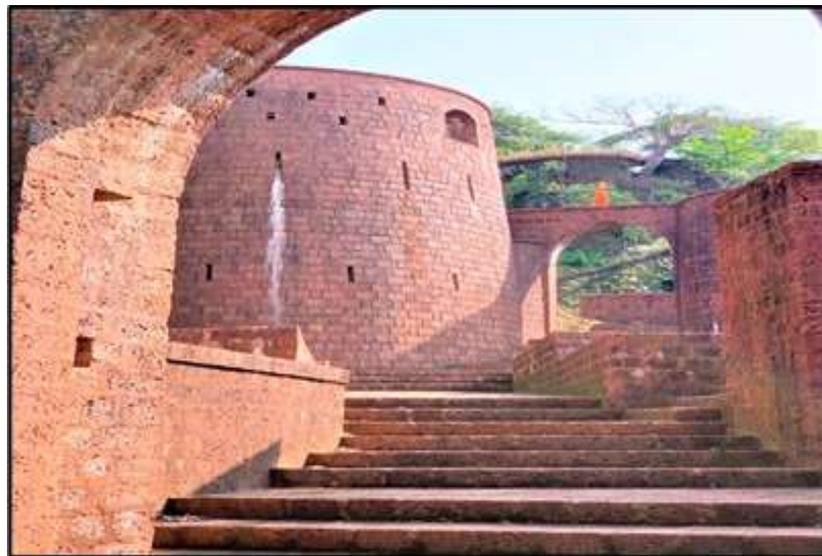


**Figure 14: Vijaydurg Dockyard**

(Source: D. G. Dhabu, *Kulabkar Angre Sarkhel*, Plates 9, 12.)



**Figure 15: Sindhudurg Fort, Malvan Taluka**



**Figure 16: Restored Bastions of Redi-Yashwantgad Fort,  
Vengurla Taluka**

*(Source: Google Images)*

## Appendix D

### The Phaag 'IngrajanCHA Halla'

प्रथम दस-याचे दिवशी होस  
इंग्रज आले होस बा-यावऱस होस

नांगर टाकून होस नांगर टाकून गास  
टाकून हवल्यावर नांगर टाकून गास  
टाकून हवल्यावर माऱ देतो किल्ल्यावरस

सुमरान करून होस सुमरान करून गास  
करून रामेशाचे, सुमरान करून गास  
सुमरान करून रामेशाचे सेने गोळा मारीतोस

गोळा पडला होस गोळा पडला गास  
पडला तरांड्यावरी गोळा पडला गास  
पडला तरांड्यावरी तरांडा जळायस लागलास

नांगर कापून होस नांगर कापून गास  
कापून वरच्यावरी नांगर कापून गास  
कापून वरच्यावरी इंग्रज पळायस लागलास होस

इंग्रज गेलास होस गेला इलायत्या नगरासला गास  
गेलास इलायत्या नगरास हिल्लार घालून मारावा त्यालास

#### Translation:

*On the occasion of Dussehra, British arrived for the battle.  
Anchoring the boats, they started firing on the fort.*

*The Ramesha (Rameshwar) was remembered, the (Maratha)  
garrison fired cannon balls (on British ships).*

*As a cannon ball hit the Taranda (A type of Ship), it started  
burning. British after cutting the anchor, ran away to Vilayat  
(British homeland). They were chased and punished.*

(Source: Ramesh Kubal, and Ankush Sarang, *KonkanCHA Gabit  
Shigmotsav*, pp. 173-174.)

## Appendix E

### Remnants of Gabit Community's Military Career



**Figure 17: Virgals and Satigals in the premises of Dirbadevi-Rameshwar Temple Complex, Jamsande, Devgad Taluka**



**Figure 18: A Cannon Gun in the premises of Dirbadevi-Rameshwar Temple Complex**

*(Source: Author's Personal Collection)*

## Appendix F

### Eminent Personalities in Gabit Community

Sr. No.	Field	Name	Brief Information
1.	Freedom Fighter	Hutatma Dattaram Koyande	♦ He received martyrdom during Civil Disobedience Movement at Karachi.
2.	Higher Education	Dr. Pushpa Bhawe	♦ Former HoD, Dept. of Marathi, Ruia College. ♦ Socialist Activist.
3.		Shri Vasant K. Davtar	♦ Former HoD, Dept. of Marathi, K. J. Somaiya College.
4.		Dr. Ramesh Kubal	♦ Former Professor, Dept. of Marathi, Annasaheb Vartak College, Vasai, and Dept. of Marathi, University of Mumbai. ♦ Founder Member, Konkan Marathi Sahitya Parishad.
5.		Dr. Ankush Sarang	♦ Former HoD, Dept. of History, Sonubhau Baswant Arts and Commerce College, Shahapur, Thane.
6.		Public Services	Dr. V. G. Khobrekar
7.	Shri Ashok Kharade		♦ Former Officer, Maharashtra State Archives
8.	Shri Achyut Tari		♦ Former Chief Librarian, Mumbai Marathi Granth Sangrahalaya.
9.	Miss Sayali Dhurat		♦ IPS Officer, Bihar (2010) Cadre

10.	Entertainment	Sri Kamlakar Sarang, Shrimati Lalan Sarang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Famous for their contribution in Marathi Theatre and Cinema.</li> <li>◆ Mr. Sarang wrote, directed, and produced various dramas.</li> <li>◆ Sakharam Binder was a well-known drama in which both had worked together.</li> </ul>
11.	Politics	Shri Parashuram Uparkar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ First MLA from the community elected in Maharashtra Legislative Assembly.</li> <li>◆ Chairman, Akhil Bharatiya Gabit Mahasangh.</li> </ul>

(Source: Ramesh Kubal, *Gabit: Kshatriya Aarmari Maratha Gharanyancha Itihas*, pp. 188-208.; Mr. Murlidhar Joshi, Interview by Author, February 03, 2024.)

## **Annexure**

### **D) Interview Questionnaire No. 1 (About Gabit Community in Rural Areas)**

1. Sir, kindly provide your brief introduction.
2. How did you come in contact with Gabit Samaj associations?
3. Kindly provide a brief sketch about lifestyle of Gabit Community in Sindhudurg District (Cuisine, Clothing, etc.).
4. The principal occupation of the community is fishing in rural areas. To what extent, modernization had been adopted by the community? What were the challenges?
5. What is a present condition of literacy rate in the community and how it has influenced traditional occupation? Any benefits?
6. Kindly tell me about the personalities from the community who have achieved success in their respective fields.
7. Today the community gets reservation benefits at both Central and State Levels. To what extent community was able to utilize them?
8. I would like to know about the cultural life of a Gabit and its peculiarities.

9. Is young generations preserving the culture ? Are you satisfied on those efforts ? In what way *Chakarmanis* participate to conserve the same ?

10. There exists a demand to rename the term Gabit with Maratha since British times. There is an inferiority complex about the identity Gabit among the community members. What is your say on this ?

11. Gabit Community seems to be had left behind in terms of economic, social and political benefits. What steps should be taken by the community ?

## **II) Interview Questionnaire No. 2 (About Gabit Community in Mumbai)**

1. Sir, kindly provide your brief introduction.
2. How did you come in contact with Gabit Samaj associations?
3. When did your family arrive in Mumbai ? In which localities of Mumbai, Gabits predominantly had settled down ? Any specific reasons ?
4. The members of the community preferred Govt jobs. Which sectors Gabits have explored the most (Banking, Public Services, etc.) ? Kindly provide names of few individuals and their achievements.
5. What is a perspective of the community towards Trade, Industry, Politics, etc. If any members of the

community have achieved their name in these areas, please mention their names.

6. What is a present condition of literacy and employment rate in the community ?

7. Today the community gets reservation benefits at both Central and State Levels. To what extent community was able to utilize them ?

8. Are you satisfied with Gabit Chakarmani's involvement in the preservation of traditions and culture?

9. There exists a demand to rename the term Gabit with Maratha since British times. There is an inferiority complex regarding the identity Gabit among the community members. What is your say on this ?

10. The principal occupation of the community is fishing in rural areas. To what extent, modernization had been adopted by the community ? What suggestions would you like to provide ?

11. Gabit Community seems to be had left behind in terms of economic, social and political benefits. What steps should be taken by the community ?

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