

DHANGAR

The Dhangar in Goa are recognized as shepherds who are similar to the Maratha shepherds of Konkan and the Southern Maratha country. According to Enthoven, they descended from a Shudra father and a Mahishya woman and according to an old mythological tradition they were created from the dust of Shiva's body. There is a myth that the first sheep and goat emerging out from forests started damaging the crops of the cultivators who being helpless, prayed to Shiva to save them from this problem. He (Shiva) then created the first Dhangar for rearing the flocks. Some of the community members opine that the name is derived from *dhenu* which means cow or probably from *dhan* meaning wealth in terms of the flocks of sheep and goats. They prefer to live in the forests where waste lands are widespread enabling their cattle to graze. By virtue of their profession as shepherds, they have developed semi-nomadic habits. Malhotra who studied Dhangars of Maharashtra says that, although most of the Dhangar castes domesticate sheep, there are also others among them who are weavers like Sangars; some of them make yarn and knit, others buy the yarn and make rough blankets. He further writes that Dhangars are a touchable caste-cluster. Their place in the peasant society is well established as food producers. They are the sole suppliers of meat protein and the much needed manure to the farmers. Besides, they provide cheap raw blankets. A section, Dhangar, who keeps buffaloes, supplies fat and milk. These Dhangars have spread into Goa. In Goa, they have been mostly concentrated in Canacona, Quepem, Ponda and Sanguem talukas for generations. Their relations are also to be found in Karwar of Karnataka and Savantawadi of Maharashtra. According to Enthoven, Dhangars are distributed all over the Deccan, Konkan, and some parts of Northern and Eastern India. But in Eastern and some parts of Northern India, the Dhangars are treated as farm-servants. The Dhangars in Goa and Konkan are merely shepherds, but in Northern and Eastern India they are mostly scavengers and sometimes employed in clearing the jungles or as labourers of the contractors. So, they may be different in their occupational characteristics. Moreover, in Eastern India they have been considered a scheduled tribe community, while in Konkan, Goa and Karnataka they have been

treated neither as a Scheduled Caste, nor as a Scheduled Tribe. They are higher in the social rank there.

Dhangars of Goa have no synonyms and sub-groups as stated by them. Their total strength in Goa is also unknown to them. The present field investigation is undertaken in Dabel which is an isolated hamlet, called Dhangarwadi in the Poingunim village of Canacona Block. It is inhabited by only Dhangars, about 80 souls, in ten households.

Their habitations are surrounded by the forests with vast stretches of pasture lands. They live in huts with walls of wattled reeds and roofs thatched with straw. Their sheep, cows and buffaloes are kept tied outside their residence, but the goats are kept inside in a separate corner. The habitations of the Dhangars in the Konkani region including Goa, are influenced by the South-West monsoon with heavy rainfall which encourages the growth of green vegetation even on the rough terrain of the foot hills. They generally prefer to live on the foothills for pasturing their cattle.

Dhangars speak Konkani, but can understand and speak Marathi too. In Goa, they can be easily identified by their dress and occupation which separates them from the other communities of this region. While they go with their cattle for grazing, they are generally found carrying a stick or staff, with one or two dogs which assist them in driving the flocks and also sometimes in saving them from wild animals. The men use loin-cloth (*cashitl*) and turban (*ifeta*) on the head. Elderly women wear (*kasa*) sari without a choli but the present generation is using cholis. The women also use a necklace of four/five folds with beads of different colours.

Dhangars are non-vegetarian and they take fish, meat of goats, sheep, fowl, deer, hare etc., as and when available. But they do not eat beef and pork. Since they do not have good agricultural lands, they produce millet (*ragi*) and jowar in their lands which lie under the foothills mostly covered by laterite soil. So, the *ragi* is their staple food crop. The men mostly take liquor prepared from molasses; women take it generally on festive and ceremonial occasions. They usually do not prepare it at home. Both men and women (mostly aged) smoke *bidli*. They drink tea without milk and their children only drink milk. They earn money by selling milk. During the lean season, they sometimes eat roots, tubers, leafy vegetables and fruits collected from the forests. They usually do not use any oil as the cooking medium, but coconut is used for preparation of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes.

Dhangars in Goa are not aware of their sub-castes. They only know that they are pure Dhangar (*assal Dhangar*). Others recognize them as the Maratha Dhangars or the Konkani Dhangars. They state that they have migrated from the Konkani areas of Maharashtra and have been living in Goa through generations. According to Enthoven, the Maratha Dhangars are in all probability the representatives of the original Dhangars who settled in the Marathi speaking districts.

Their surnames are very much identical with their clan deities which are totemic in nature. The commonest surnames used by them in Goa are as follows: Choughule, Kokre, Motte, Pavane, Jangale, Humaane, Lambare, Dolphode, Kollakar, Kharat, Taathe, Zore, Misaal, Toto, Bavdan, Varak, Yemkar and Tong. According to them, there is no hierarchy in their surnames. Marriage is prohibited within the same surname and a man must not marry within his own sect or that of his mother; nor he can marry a first cousin. The community's perception of the *varna* order is that they belong to the Sudra *varna*.

Polygyny is permitted and no stigma is attached to the taking of a second wife. But it has now become rare because of high bride price which varies from Rs. 1,000/- to Rs. 3,000/- and even more, given both in cash and kind. Cow or buffalo is preferable as a gift. Earlier, marriage used to be held even before the age of puberty. Now-a-days, the age of marriage for girls varies from 16 years to 20 years and for boys from 20 years to 25 years and sometimes more. Marriages with MBD (mother's brother's daughter) and FSD (father's sister's daughter) are allowed, but they cannot marry mother's sister's daughter. Sororal polygyny is permitted. Again two sisters can also be married by two brothers. At present, monogamy has become a common practice. The Dhangar now marries for a second time only if the first wife is dead. Polyandry is unknown to them. A widow remarriage is permitted and is locally called *marut*. Marriage is called *lagan*. A widow is not allowed to marry any descendant of her deceased husband. If such a marriage occurs, the couple will be fined. Divorce is allowed, but the children are usually kept with the mother. A widower is permitted to marry either a maiden girl or a widow. Negotiation is the general mode of acquiring mates. But, if a virgin is seduced by a casteman, he is compelled to marry her; if by a member of another caste, she is excommunicated. Mangalsutra and vermilion (*kumkum*) are the marriage symbols for a girl. They follow the norms of patrilocal system after the marriage of a girl.

Dhangars prefer a nuclear family. The married son generally lives

separately. At present, the joint family system is rarely found among them. Regarding inter-personal relations, respect and love are exchanged between the elders and the youngsters. Daughters of marriageable age sometimes become a burden for the parents. A joking relationship exists between the grandparents and the grandchildren, the younger brother's and elder brother's wives (when the difference of age between them is not much). Inter-family relationship is cordial. After the death of the father, only the sons inherit of their father's movable and immovable properties. The eldest son possesses the right of succession after the death of his father.

The Dhangar society is dominated by the males. The father becomes the head of the family. The women are very hard-working. They remain engaged not only in household chores, but also work as labourers to support their families. Their role in the collection of fuel and fodder for cattle is also significant in their daily life. Their participation in religious and ceremonial activities is also important.

Dhangars do not observe any pre-delivery ritual. Women restrict their movements during pregnancy. After the birth of a child, the mother is held impure for seven days. During this period, she is not allowed to enter the kitchen or participate in any religious activity. On the fifth day, they perform *satti* and the goddess *Panchvi* is worshipped. On the seventh day, it is named. Bhatji is not called to perform the rituals, which are generally performed by an elderly person of the family. After one year, the head-shaving (*mundan*) ceremony (both for male and female children) is performed by them. The maternal uncle of the baby attends the function with new clothes or ornaments for the child according to his financial capacity. They do not observe any puberty ritual for girls.

The offer of marriage comes from the boy's father. Before the marriage is performed, the bride-price is settled by the elderly persons of the community. The wedding date is fixed at the residence of the girl, in the presence of the Bhatji and the leader of the community (*Budvant*). Betel nut and coconut kernel pieces are served at the time of settlement. The marriage is held at the residence of the girl's father. The *Budvant* who generally plays the role of the priest of their community, is entrusted with performing the rituals of the marriage ceremony according to the Vedic rule. At present, some well-to-do families employ the Brahman priest to perform these rites. Both the bride and bride-groom are brought to the sacred fire and then, the free ends of their wedding garments

are tied into a knot as a symbol of perfect union. Then they exchange their garlands. At present some of their family members arrange *mangalashitak* by employing the Brahman priest who repeats the marriage verse, while the family members and their invitees bless the bridal couple by throwing rice or wheat grains over their heads. The bride-groom ties the *mangalsutra* round the bride's neck. After marriage, the feast is offered by the girl's father. The marriage takes place during day. The boy's father alongwith the bride and bride-groom goes back to his residence on the same day. Widow remarriage is performed at night.

After death, the dead body is buried in their own graveyard. Mourning is observed for twelve days on the death of an adult and for three days for a child. They employ Bhatji to perform the *shraddh* ceremony. On the twelfth day, only the eldest son offers his hair and the *mundan* is done by the barber (Mhalo). On that day, a goat is sacrificed by the family of the deceased to offer a feast to the relatives and friends. They take non-vegetarian food (meat of sacrificed goat) and alcoholic drinks. The mourning period is observed by taking vegetarian food, as a mark of respect to the deceased.

Dhangars profess Hinduism. According to them, Lord Krishna is their chief god. They believe that their community name Dhangar is derived from cow (*dhenu*) which was his (Lord Krishna's) favourite animal. Besides this, they worship Lord Shiva, Vithoba of Pandharpur, and also their clan deity (*kuldev*) such as Khandoba, Shani, Janai and so forth. They must worship their clan deity specially at the time of birth and marriage ceremonies. They observe the important Hindu festivals such as Dassara, Diwali and Holi. During Diwali, they decorate the body and horns of their domestic animals with colours.

Most of the Dhangar in Goa are landless. Their chief and hereditary occupation is to rear sheep. Some of them domesticate cows and buffaloes specially for milk. One family is tending at least fifteen to twenty sheep and goats. They earn money by selling their sheep and goats. They also sell the milk of goats and buffaloes. Sometimes, they sell the wool of sheep. The women collect roots, fruits, tubers, etc., from the nearest forest for their subsistence. The boys of ten to fifteen years of age are engaged in tending their cattle. When men go outside to work as labourers, the women look after their domestic animals. Payment of wages is made in both cash and kind. They have their own community council and the Budavant is its head, who usually settles their problems related to their society. Besides their own community council, there is a Village Panchayat

which is supposed to look after their welfare. They do not have any plastic and graphic art, but some of them are efficient in weaving woollen blankets. They have stated that they have folk-songs and folk-tales, but they could not explain themselves clearly. They do not have any notable type of music and dance.

Dhangars mostly work in the agricultural fields either as labourers or as share-croppers. They give a one-sixth share of the total produce to the land-owner as share-croppers. Both of them try to maintain a good relationship. In respect of their community norms, the Dhangars do not accept cooked food and water from the Chambhars, Mahars, Parits (Dhobis), Mhalos (Barbers), Christians and Muslims. On the other hand, the latter groups take water and cooked food from Dhangars. They claim that they are superior to them in social status. They take the services of the Mhalo, Brahman priest as and when required. Other communities are also taking their services as labourers. But as they live in isolated areas with semi-nomadic habits, their relationship with other communities is not well-knitted. There is no restriction on their sharing wells and other water sources and also on their entry to the temple and the Panchayatghar.

The children of Dhangars are rarely sent to school. There is only one primary school in their locality. The middle and high school, hospital and medical centre are far away. Their area is not connected by a metalled road. Electricity is not there. In fact, they are not only backward, but are also reluctant to enjoy the modern facilities most of which remain unknown to them.

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