



Understanding the socio-economic status and socio-ecological interactions of the Wadha community in the Banni grasslands

Kutch, Gujarat

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Executive summary

The Wadha community is among the least known communities of the Kutch region in Gujarat. They are among the poorest and fall at the bottom of the social hierarchy, often being considered untouchables by members of other communities. Wadhas, however, are repositories of traditional ecological knowledge about the region's floral and faunal assemblages, through their lived experiences of depending directly on the grasslands for sustenance. This study was conducted in the Banni grasslands, Kutch, to gain a holistic understanding of the socio-economic condition of and traditional ecological knowledge held by the Wadhas, so as to design interventions focussed at organising them towards sustainable livelihoods. I first map out the Wadha settlements (8 permanent and 2-3 temporary) across Banni and describe their structure and locations. These settlements were mostly built through NGO support post the 2001 Bhuj earthquake, and their being 1-2 Kms away from the main village is indicative of caste-based segregation between Wadhas and other communities. The history of the Wadha community is briefly discussed, including how their religious identity changed from Islam-influenced animism to Hinduism, and how that affected their interactions with the other communities. I then describe in depth each of their main livelihoods: (1) lacquered wood-turning; (2) honey collection; (3) gum collection; (4) charcoal-making; and (5) other labour-based work; along with details of their respective supply chains. I also discuss issues pertaining to these livelihoods where applicable, such as the declining trend of lacquered wood-turning and the middlemen-infested supply chain of honey. Hunting practices of the Wadhas are detailed, along with their use of other natural resources. I also describe the origin of Sheikhs (Wadhas who converted to Islam) and their relationship with the larger Wadha community. Finally, I conclude with key recommendations – cultural preservation, marketing honey, reducing the impacts of hunting, facilitating legal recognition of Wadhas' rights on grassland resources, fostering education, sanitation and health interventions. These interventions to uplift the Wadhas both socially and economically would require long-term collaborative commitment.

Introduction

India is home to 705 officially recognised indigenous tribes, with many more communities whose status as a tribe is not recognised in government records (Mamo et al. 2024). Most of these tribes live in remote areas with very little access to basic facilities, such as clean drinking water, health care, etc. Many tribes, including the ones which are not officially recognised, remain poorly known, with very little documentation of their ways of life, knowledge systems and socio-economic conditions. This lack of understanding may act as a barrier for both government and private organisations in conducting activities aimed towards the betterment of our indigenous tribes.

The Kutch landscape of Gujarat is home to several indigenous tribes or communities. Pastoralists such as the Maldharis, whose livelihood depends on rearing livestock for their milk, dominate the population. The Wadha community, on the other hand, is a minority within the marginalised. Unlike the Maldharis, the Wadhas traditionally do not own any *maal* (livestock). Instead, they are directly dependent on the grasslands, with their traditional livelihoods being carpentry and honey collection (Chaudhary 2022). They are also a hunting community and are thus known to harbour deep knowledge about faunal assemblages in Kutch (Chaudhary 2022). Wadhas are among the lowest in the social hierarchy and the poorest people in the landscape (Kothari 2015). Little is known about the current status of livelihood practices, socio-economics and traditional knowledge of the Wadha community. A comprehensive understanding of how increasing interventions in the Kutch landscape affect the lives of the Wadha community is lacking. Interestingly, many of these interventions, such as ecosystem restoration and industrialization (through Agriculture, Salt and Solar industries) are themselves in conflict with each other. It is also important to understand the Wadhas' dependence on their ecosystem for sustaining their livelihoods and document their knowledge systems with regard to the region's flora and fauna, so as to design strategic interventions for sustainable livelihoods while also engaging them in conservation work. Given this background, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. Map Wadha settlements in the Banni landscape
2. Describe Wadha livelihoods and their supply chains and assess how these might have changed over the years
3. Document traditional ecological knowledge held by Wadhas
4. Understand the future aspirations of Wadhas

Since it is believed that the Wadhas are traditionally skilled hunters, the larger vision was to understand their ecological knowledge and wisdom to engage them in conservation work through providing alternative livelihood and protein source options; providing education to the children and youth on the ecological significance of their ecosystem and its wildlife; and to identify areas to enforce environmental laws and help them understand such legal provisions. Therefore, this study was important to gain a holistic understanding of a Wadha's life to design a comprehensive strategy.

Study area

This study was conducted in the Banni grasslands, Kutch, Gujarat. The region is spread across approximately 2,500 square kilometres, covering 48 villages organised into 19 Panchayats. Banni's population is dominated by Maldharis (with 22 different ethnicities, all of whom are Muslims), followed by Meghwals/Marwaras (Hindu Dalits) and Wadhas. As a result, the region is home to a diverse set of livelihoods, from pastoralism and livestock rearing to various forms of handicraft.

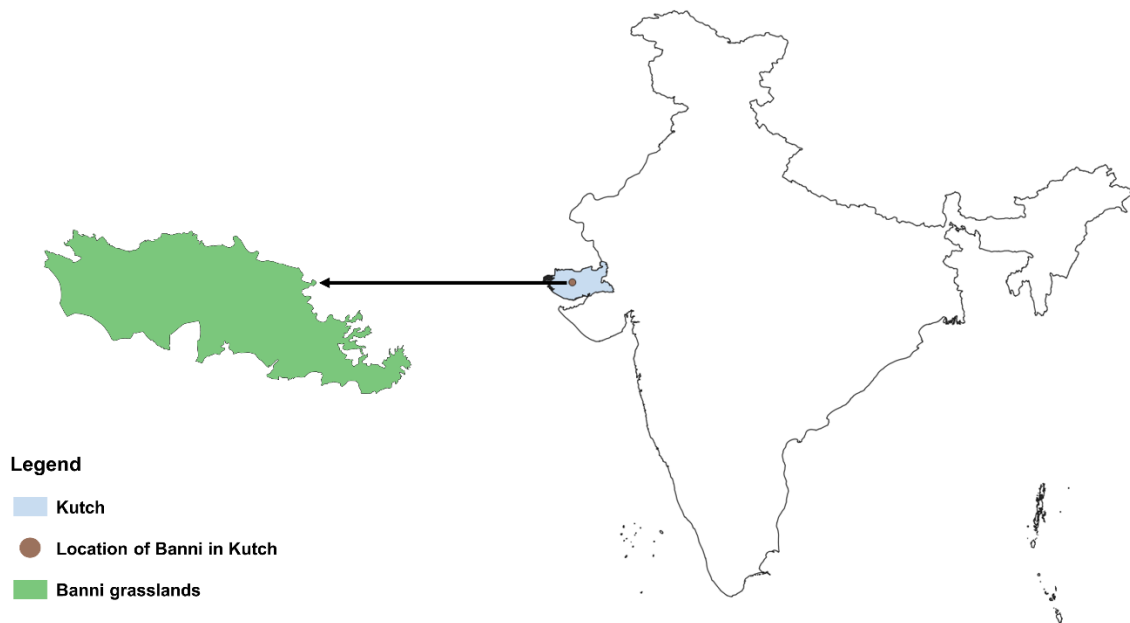


Fig. 1: Map of Banni grasslands (study area) in Kutch.

During the 1970s, following an initiative by the Govt. of India to arrest the natural southward expansion of the salt marshes of the White Rann, a plant, *Prosopis juliflora* (native to South America), was introduced in the region. This plant subsequently became invasive and is currently spread widely across Kutch, covering more than 50% of the Banni landscape. This invasion has substantially changed the region's ecology and the traditional livelihoods of its communities.

Methodology

To identify and map Wadha settlements, I began by reviewing past reports and consulting members of various local communities, most of whom were staff at the RAMBLE research station at Hodka. Following this, I conducted field visits to these settlements for ground verification and introduction with the Wadha community. I asked the Wadhas from these villages about the location of other Wadha settlements in the region.

I then started data collection on their livelihoods and traditional ecological knowledge. I made repeated visits to interact with villagers in select Wadha settlements that were closer to the RAMBLE field station for logistical reasons. An effort was made to include representation from both men and women, with female interviewers included in our team to facilitate better engagement with Wadha women. Data collection was carried out using a qualitative approach, combining informal interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions (FDGs; 3 meetings covering 6 villages) and literature review. Oral consent was obtained from participants prior to these interactions. Due to the socio-economic challenges faced by the Wadha community and their wariness towards outsiders, documenting consent in writing or via recordings was not feasible, as it would have hindered the trust-building process. The FDGs, carried out towards the end of field work, had both men and women from the community together and the full conversation was recorded (here, oral consent was recorded). I also interviewed some Wadhas residing outside the Banni region (e.g., at Nirona and Fulay). Finally, I interviewed other stakeholders in the Wadha livelihood supply chains, such as dealers, NGO personnel and a Forest Department official, to gain a deeper understanding of the economics of their livelihoods.

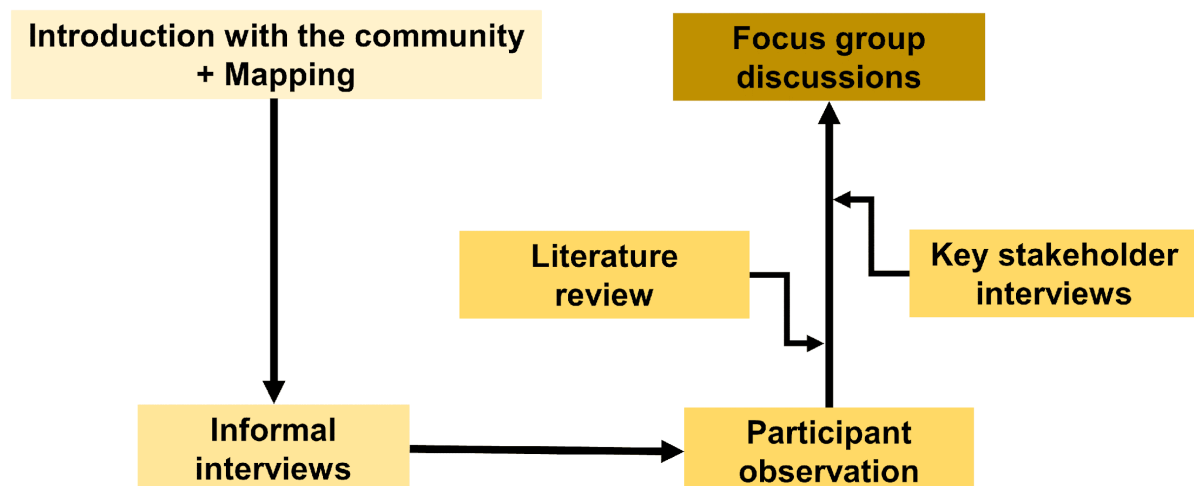


Fig. 2: Flowchart showing the order in which the different methods were employed for data collection during this study.

Results and Discussion

I. Wadha settlements and population

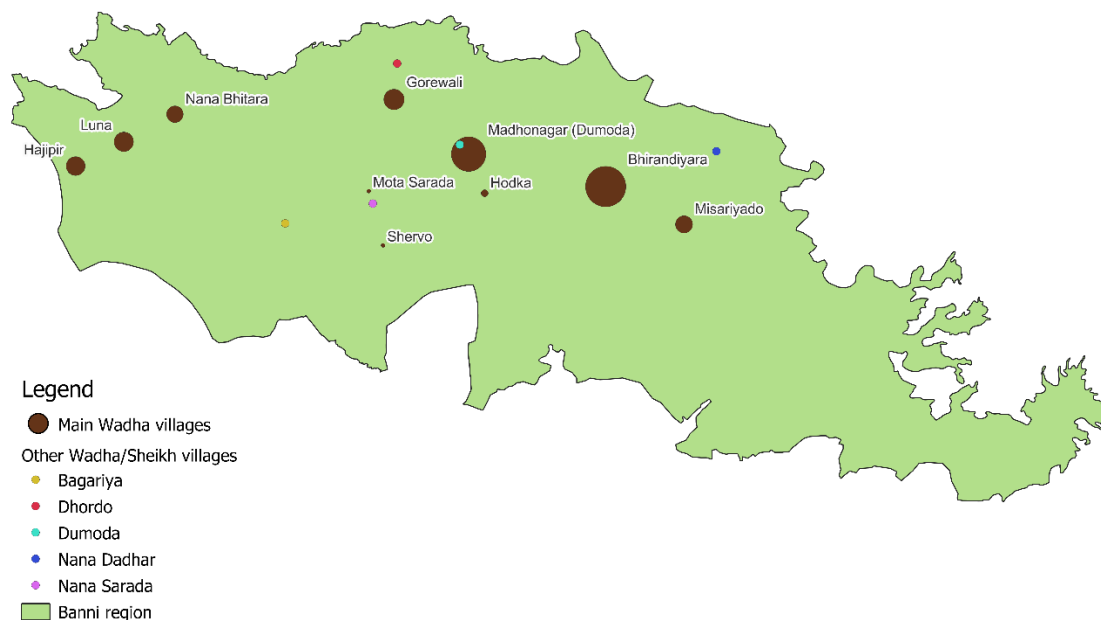


Fig. 3: Wadha (Koli) settlements in the Banni region (dark brown dots) – the size of the dots is in proportion to the size of the settlements. Settlements in Mota Sarada and Shervo are temporary (*jhopris*). Bagariya and Dadhhar also have Wadha settlements during some years (also shown on the map). Dumado, Dhordo and Nana Sarada have Sheikh (Wadhas who converted to Islam) settlements. Wadhas in Hajipir, Luna, Bhitara and Gorewali are close to each other in familial relations as are those in Madhonagar, Hodka, Bhirandiyara and Misariyado. Villages outside Banni (e.g., Nirona and Fulay) also have Wadha settlements.

There are 8 permanent and 2-4 temporary Wadha settlements in the Banni region (Fig. 3, Table 1). The permanent settlements are situated 1-2 Km away from the main village. This is because Wadhas are treated as untouchables across most communities of Banni and are consequently distanced by other communities.



Fig 4: A typical Wadha settlement (permanent) with *bhungas* and a Ramdevpir temple. These were built through NGO support (RSS, Swami Narayan Trust and Vishwa Hindu Parishad).

The settlements consist of *bhungas* (huts) mostly arranged in a circular fashion around a shaded seating area in the middle; each *bhunga* accommodates one family (2-4 members). There are toilets constructed behind each *bhunga*, but these are often used as storerooms. A few settlements are composed of single-floor houses instead of *bhungas*. A Ramdevpir temple is always present in these settlements. These settlements were sponsored by NGOs (RSS, Swami Narayan Trust and Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and government officials, a process that began in the aftermath of the 2001 Bhuj earthquake. The temporary settlements are comprised of *jhopris* (makeshift sheds made of bamboo, dried bushes and tarpaulin). These are set up by the Wadhas when they migrate to other villages for labour work (e.g., charcoal production) or to higher grounds during monsoon (when lower elevation areas face waterlogging). While most permanent settlements have a system for water supply, these often do not work. As a result, Wadhas living in both permanent and temporary settlements have to get water from the nearby village. Some permanent settlements do not have electricity; there, people often divert electricity from nearby power lines for their use. In temporary settlements, the Wadhas often do not have any access to electricity – some own small solar panels for minor uses, such as for charging mobile phones. None of the settlements have a school (the school in Bhirandiyara’s Wadha settlement was closed down several years ago). These settlements also do not have any health-related facilities, such as clinics or medicine shops, and when healthcare is required, people have to go to one of the main villages (e.g., Hodka, Bhirandiyara, etc.)

Table 1: List of Wadha settlements in Banni. The same family is often involved in multiple livelihoods. The family counts are relative and not absolute.

Name of village	Type of settlement	No. of huts	Lacquered wood-turning	Honey collection	Gum collection	Wood cutting	Charcoal production	Labour work	Remarks
Misariyado	Permanent	13	2	10	-	10	-	-	-
Bhirandiyara	Permanent	76	-	50	-	55	1	74	-
Hodka	Permanent	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-
Madhonagar (Dumado)	Permanent	56	-	28	28	-	-	28	Not all 56 families reside here
Gorewali	Permanent	19	-	10	-	10	19	-	-
Bhitara	Permanent	12	1	12	-	12	2	-	-
Luna	Permanent	17	-	15	-	-	17	-	-
Hajipir	Permanent	16	-	-	-	-	4	12	-
Servo/Shervo	Temporary	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-
Sarada	Temporary	3-4	-	5	-	-	5	-	-

Based on the number of *bhungas* across all the permanent settlements (~210) and considering each household has ~3 members on an average, the Banni region has a Wadha population of around 630 people. Marriages happen both within and across settlements (including settlements outside Banni, such as Nirona). Most Wadhas have government-approved ID cards such as Aadhar and Ration cards (facilitated by NGOs), yet most still do not have any bank accounts.



Fig. 5: A temporary Wadha settlement (*jhopri*) at a charcoal production site.

II. A brief history of the Wadhas

The Wadha community has very little documentation in government records. According to a study by Prof. Rita Kothari (2015), Wadhas are a Denotified Tribe, and currently fall in the OBC category¹. Based on existing literature and my interviews, it is evident that the lives of the Wadhas have undergone substantial changes during the time leading up to the Bhuj earthquake, 2001. Ancestrally, Wadhas were animists. They were the carpenters of the landscape and coexisted inter-dependently with the other communities. Their transactions with the other communities followed a barter system. For instance, they used to provide Maldharis with wooden cutlery, and would in exchange get milk or advice on important matters. There was also a ritual whereby the Wadhas were commissioned the work of building wooden beds for newlyweds in Maldhari households, in exchange for goats or buffaloes. Similarly, the Meghwals or Marwaras also had some inter-dependency with the Maldharis. However, over time, with inter-religious ties weakening, the Wadha community started facing increased marginalisation because they did not fall in either category – they began to be treated as untouchables. Through their long-term association with the Maldharis, the Wadhas had assumed a number of Islamic rituals as their own (some of which continue to this day). They celebrated festivals such as Eid, marriages happened through *nikah* (Islamic marriage ritual), and children were given Muslim names. Some Wadhas, after consulting with the Maldharis, converted to Islam and assumed the title Sheikh. However, around 2001, especially after the earthquake, there was a significant inflow of NGOs and Govt. funding in the Kutch region to provide relief to the local people. When these organisations went beyond the city of Bhuj (which was perhaps the most affected), they came across all the local communities of Kutch. They particularly noted the plight of and the struggles faced by the Wadha community (who back then lived in *jhopris* year-round). Some among these were Hindu missionaries, and there were thus large-scale conversions of Wadhas from Islam-influenced animism to Hinduism. These organisations built them houses (the permanent settlements) and the Ramdevpir temples (members of the Marwara community are ardent followers of Ramdevpir). With their conversion, Wadhas were renamed as Wadha Kolis. Representative from these NGOs even taught them how to worship and the festivals to celebrate (such as Navratri). Marriage rituals changed from being Islamic to Hindu, with 4 *phas* (circumambulating the sacred fire) and they were officiated by a *Maharaj* (priest). But, Islamic rituals of marriage between cousins and burying their dead remain.

¹ <https://sje.gujarat.gov.in/ddcw/List-of-Castes?lang=English>

III. Livelihoods

A. Wood and lacquer art

The wood and lacquer art practiced by the Wadhas is perhaps the earliest of their livelihoods. The word ‘wadha’ means ‘carpenter’ in English, and they are known to make wooden artefacts such as ladles, spoons, other cutlery and even beds and table stands. They would make these items to order from other local communities and exchanged them in a barter system for edibles such as milk from the Maldharis and foodgrains from farmers. The beginning of lacquer art in Kutch can be traced back to the village Nirona. My conversation with Mr. Paresh Mangaliya, deputy director (trade) at Khamir, was useful in understanding this origin. Below is a paraphrased version of the history as revealed through our discussion:

Approximately 250 years ago, there was a man named Niro Wadha, whose livelihood was cutting and selling wood. One day he chanced upon a secretion from the trees (lac) and became curious. He washed the secretion and it separated into two layers, turning the water brown. He burned it and the secretion melted into a liquid from its semi-solid state. He thought of applying this melt on wood, and not only was it easy to apply, it also gave a good finish to the surface. Thereafter, he started using lac to coat his products, becoming famous in the locality. The king was impressed with his work and he started getting more orders. Soon his village was named ‘Nirona’ after him. The Kutch Museum and Prag Mahal have some specimens of lacquered wood on display.

The present status of this art stands in stark contrast to its past—there are only a handful of villages in Kutch where Wadhas still practice this art. For instance, within Banni only two villages remain where three Wadha families still practice lacquer work. In the following section, I provide an outline of Wadha lacquer art, from material sourcing to marketing.

Dye making: To add colour to lac, it first needs to be melted into a viscous fluid, after which the colour is added in powdered form. The resultant mixture is then given the shape of a stick using one’s hands, which can be used once it is dry. “(But in a household,) men are not supposed to work with fire”, said Mr. Paresh Mangaliya, who has extensively interacted with Wadha families in the Kutch region, “whereas, women use fire to cook on a daily basis”, he further remarked. Hence, the process of adding colour to lac became the role of the women across Wadha households. In the beginning there were three naturally available colours to mix the lac with. Raw lac is brown in colour, adding turmeric imparted the lac yellow colour and mixing coal imparted the colour black. Over time the Wadhas started adding more colour varieties to lac, which were derived from other organic materials such as mineralised rocks. Currently, however, the Wadhas do not collect their own lac or prepare their own dyes. Instead, they buy both items from markets in Bhuj or from the crafts NGO Khamir. I was able to observe the dye making process as carried out by the husband-wife duo, Fakira Wadha and Jena Wadha in Misariyado village, which is summarised below:



Fig. 6: Jenabai mixing lac with coloured powder.

We reached Misariyado in the morning to meet Jenabai, who was going to give us a demonstration of the process of mixing colour to lac. However, Jenabai had gone to the main village for some work, and so we waited with her husband, Fakira bhai, who was coating a wooden 'belan' with coloured lac on this 'Sangharo'. After finishing some of his work, Fakira bhai decided to start the demonstration himself. He put a few dried sticks in a small 'chulha' and started a fire. Next, he brought out the solid lac tablets (circular and dark brown in colour), the coloured powder and a stick with a narrow end. He first held the stick in the flame to heat its narrow end and touched it to a lac tablet kept on a plate, which immediately got stuck to the stick (at its melted end). He then put the stick, now with a lac tablet attached to its narrow end, back into the flame. Once the lac was slightly softened, he removed the stick from the flame and rolled it over the remaining lac tablets on the plate, which quickly got attached to the already softened lac. This was followed by another round of softening the lac over the flame. By this time, Jenabai had arrived and she took over. She poured some yellow powder over the plate and rolled the narrow end of the stick with molten lac over it; she also sprinkled this powder over the molten lac. Now, she briefly placed the powder-coated lac in the flame, took it out and started mashing it against the plate – first using the other end of the stick and then also using her hands (while the lac is still hot). This process of adding coloured powder, putting it over the flame and mashing it, was repeated a few times, after which the lac had become yellow. She then passed the stick over to Fakira bhai, who scraped the coloured lac off the stick and onto a wooden platform. Next, he started beating the mixture with a hammer for a few minutes and then pulled the semi-solid product into the shape of a long, flattened strip. This strip dried up and hardened in the next few

minutes, after which he broke it into smaller pieces for use. Following this method, Jenabai and Fakira bhai prepared two more colour variants, by mixing different colours together. The process of manually mashing heated lac is not easy because it causes a burning sensation on the hands, as confirmed by Jenabai. All the variants of powdered colour were bought from Bhuj, except for the colour black, which is organically sourced. “Black colour is sourced from the ‘kolsa’ of ‘Aakhra’”, said Jenabai. She explained that the black colour is obtained from the ash produced by burning the dried stems of *Calotropis* sp. (Aakhra), Jhaar (*Salvadora* sp.) and Kerar (*Capparis decidua*). The kolsa (coal/ash) formed by these plants is soft and can easily be mixed with lac. The kolsa made by burning *Prosopis juliflora*, on the other hand, is hard and is not used to impart colour to lac.

Sourcing wood: The Wadhas use different types of wood depending on the item being made. Items such as wooden jewellery boxes are made using the wood of neem (*Azadirachta indica*); however, the same cannot be used to make ladles. “A ladle made of neem wood, if used to cook food, would make the food taste bitter”, said Danji Bhavi Wadha, a resident of Nirona. Items made of neem wood also develop cracks faster, though they do not get attacked by termites; the wood is available for free when branches are cut for maintenance inside private ‘vaaris’ (estates/farms). The wood of *Acacia nilotica* (Desi Bavar) and *Prosopis cineraria* (Khejri) are also used by the Wadhas, but they need to be bought from other local communities in Banni, such as Pathans, Halepotras and Raisipotras.



Fig. 7: An assortment of wood from various types of trees kept for lacquered wood-turning.

Prosopis juliflora (Gaando Bavar) has emerged as an important source of wood for the Wadhas. Being an invasive species, it is widely distributed in Kutch, especially Banni. Cutting *Prosopis* is also generally encouraged across the landscape. These factors make it easily accessible to the Wadhas. But as Fakira Wadha said, “freshly cut wood of *Prosopis* is moist (*nili lakhri*) and items made using this develop holes...”. To make it amenable to wood-turning, it first needs to be dried for 2 months, after which it becomes durable and develops a better grip; often better in quality than items made of native wood.

Wood turning: The process of wood-turning is carried out on a specialised instrument called *Sangharo*. The ancestral version of this instrument comprised of two parts, was light and designed in a way that it could be carried around. The design of this instrument perhaps related to the semi-nomadic lifestyle followed by the Wadhas in the past. The end products made using the older version of *Sangharo* lacked a smooth finish. Later when some of these artisans became partners with craft-based NGOs (e.g., Khamir), the *Sangharo*’s design was improved upon to allow for a better finish to the products. The work of wood-turning is typically done by the men of Wadha households.



Fig. 8: The ancestral model of the *Sangharo*—the tool used for lacquered woodturning.



Fig. 9: Fakira Wadha turning wood on the improved model of the Sangharo.

Supply chain: The wood of neem and *Prosopis juliflora* are available free of cost to the Wadhas. But the wood of *Acacia nilotica* has to be bought; the price is Rs. 70/40 kg or Rs. 20/ft. Originally, lac was sourced directly from trees such as Ber (*Zizyphus* sp.) and Desi Bavar (*Acacia nilotica*). It was a tedious process and over time these trees also decreased in the landscape. Now lac is bought from the market as lac tablets, costing Rs. 2000-2500/kg; the coloured powder also costs Rs. 2000-2500/kg – these markets are in Bhuj (Misariyado artisans buy) and Jaipur (some Nirona artisans buy) and they get their supply of lac from other States, such as Chattisgarh. The selling price of lacquered wood items varies depending on (i) the village and (ii) whether the artisans have a connection with an NGO (e.g., Khamir).

In Misariyado, Fakira bhai receives monthly orders from Khamir, which he and his brother (Jarar bhai) work to furnish. He can make 4-5 items in a day. The cost ranges from Rs. 100 to over Rs. 500 depending on the type of item. Khamir further markets these items widely across India and abroad after accounting for a small profit margin. During the tourism season, which spans the post-monsoon and winter months, tourists directly buy these items from the Wadhas, especially in Nirona. The selling price to foreign tourists is often much higher – Jenabai from Misariyado village recalled selling a pair of ‘belans’ (rolling pins) to a foreign tourist for Rs. 1600/-. During this period, the Wadhas sometimes buy their products back from Khamir so that they can be sold to the tourists. The situation in villages where there is no intervention by NGOs such as Khamir is completely different. For instance, in Banni, Bhitara is the only other village where lacquer art is still practiced (apart from Misariyado). Here also, the lacquered items are made on order, but from other local community members, and are sold at much cheaper prices; the cost of a lacquered ‘belan’ is Rs. 50. The finish and appearance of these products also differ, with those made in Misariyado being of substantially superior quality to those being made in Bhitara.

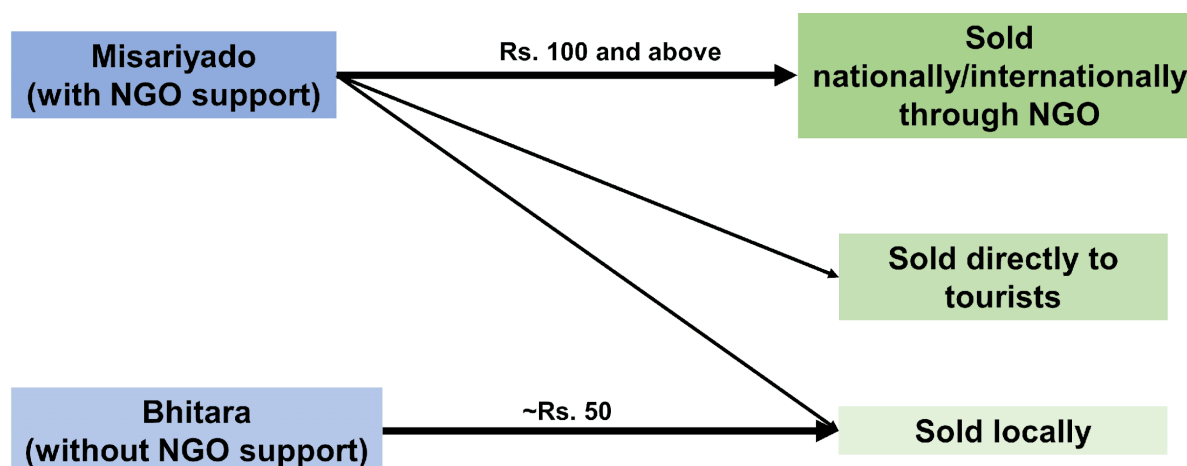


Fig. 10: Schematic of supply chains for lacquered wood-turned items for the two villages in Banni where it is still practiced. Thicker arrows indicate the primary source of sale.



Fig. 11: An assortment of lacquered wood items on display.

The future: Lacquered wood-turning is among the diminishing art forms of Kutch. Most of the artisans currently practicing this art are elderly. When I asked the artisans why the younger generations were not picking up this practice, they said that there is a lack of interest. Additionally, sourcing the raw materials has become more tedious and expensive (they were earlier naturally sourced, free of cost). We came across one instance in Misariyado where a girl in the village had learned the art and was interested to carry it on. However, she had to give up on her practice after she got married and shifted to a different village; her in-laws were not supportive of her pursuing it. People in all other villages in Banni told us that even the generation before them practiced lacquered wood-turning, but it stopped after their elders passed away – none of them learned how to do it. Interestingly, the situation is quite different in Nirona, where this art is being passed down through generations with younger men being involved. Perhaps, in Nirona, there is a better tourism-driven market for such items, and hence there is greater incentive in continuing this art. On the contrary, the villages in Banni where wood-turning is still practiced are more reliant on NGOs to connect them to the market.

B. Grassland honey collection

Honey collection is among the ancestral livelihoods of the Wadhas. The collection window is short, for about three months between March to May; the peak season is in April. In the Banni landscape, there are two species of honey bees – *Apis cerana* and *Apis florea*. These bees mostly make their hives within thick vegetation – the only two viable species being *Prosopis juliflora* and *Salvadora persica*.

The former, an invasive species, is more numerous in the landscape and bee hives are often found on them. The hives are usually located at the ground level, under the shade of the bush or tree. These bees are relatively less aggressive and my observations suggested that they do not sting readily even when their hive is disturbed.

Collection process: During honey collection season, the Wadhas leave their settlements in groups of 2-4 at around 8 am and sometimes return after 3 pm. Honey collection typically requires two people, each with a definitive role. The person (a man) who extract the honey from vegetation carries an axe and 'bidis' (cigarettes hand-rolled in Tendu leaves). After locating a hive, he clears the thicket to expose it using his axe. Then he lights a 'bidi', takes a long drag and blows the smoke over the hive. The smoke gets the bees to fly out and circle over the hive. He then cuts out the branch to which the hive is attached, cuts out the part of the hive which hosts the bee larvae and places it back near the same location where the hive was attached. The rest of the hive (the part with the honey), which is still attached to the branch, is handed over to the other person (mostly a woman). The woman carries a bucket, and uses a stick to scrape the honey off the branch and into the bucket. Both members of this duo take part in locating the hives. Most of the Wadhas whom I spoke to told me that their way of collecting honey ensures that it poses no harm to the bees and their larvae. The act of placing the larval part of the hive back on to the thicket is to ensure that the bees come back. Most Wadhas were of the opinion that the bees would rebuild the hive and in 2 weeks it could be harvested again. I was unable to validate this claim through my own observations, but it is likely that the bees stay on, as per their ecology, once the hive is tampered with.



Fig. 12: Honey being collected in a bucket.



Fig. 13: A bee hive extracted from a *Salvadora* sp. bush. The right side (lower part of the hive) contains the brood (larvae) and the left side (upper part of the hive) contains honey.

Tracking bees: The general locations of hives or other potential sites are known because the Wadhas go into the grasslands to identify them prior to the start of the peak season. Most bee hives are not easily visible as they are nestled deep inside vegetation. But the Wadhas have a technique to pinpoint the exact location of a hive within thick vegetation. Once they identify a site (a place with thick vegetation and shade), they start observing it for the movement of bees. The bees fly in and out of their hives throughout the day, and it is this movement of the bees that helps the Wadhas track the exact location of a bee hive.



Fig. 14: Rabu Matara, a Wadha, clearing the dense vegetation (*Prosopis juliflora*) to expose a bee hive.

Supply chain and marketing: The maximum volume that a single honey collection bucket can hold is 25 kg. However, on an average, each Wadha family manages to collect 5 kg of honey on a single day. Almost all of this honey is sold with very little set aside for consumption by the Wadhas themselves. Before 2017, a Forest Department mandate required wild honey to be sold exclusively to the Department's collection centre, called the Forest Nigam (or simply 'Nigam'). The rate was fixed at Rs. 25/kg of honey. In 2017 this rule was scrapped and the market was opened up. This prompted the inflow of middlemen or 'traders' (*vyaparis*) in the supply chain. The '*vyaparis*' buy honey directly from the Wadhas at anywhere between Rs. 50-100/kg and sell the product at Rs. 250-350/kg after processing. My interview with Shri Anupsinh Jethwa, sub-divisional manager, Gujarat Forest Nigam, revealed that the sale of honey to the Nigam had drastically reduced after 2017. To match the prices offered by '*vyaparis*', the Forest Department increased their rate to Rs. 80/kg, which helped slightly restore the inflow of honey into the Nigam. The Nigam has 15 centres across all of Kutch and the rate offered is revised every year. Representatives make visits to the centres right after peak honey collection season. There, those villagers who have collected honey and want to sell it, get it weighted (this honey has been subjected to basic filtration by the Wadhas themselves) and are paid in cheque. Most of these villages, especially in Banni, are quite remote and do not have the facility of nearby banks. On top of that, many Wadhas, who are perhaps the major group of honey collectors in the landscape, do not even have bank accounts. Hence, payment through a cheque takes away from their immediate requirement of cash. This could probably be one reason why they prefer to sell their honey to the '*vyaparis*' (who are based out of Bhuj, Nirona, Sumrasar, etc.) who offer immediate, but often much lower payments. My interviews also revealed that many Wadhas are not aware that the market for honey was opened up in 2017, and think that their transactions with the '*vyaparis*' are not legal. The relationship between the Wadhas and the '*vyaparis*' is an exploitative one; the '*vyaparis*' gain an advantage from the shortcomings of the Nigam and earn a substantial profit margin from their sale of honey. As rightly pointed out by the Sarpanch of Bhirandiyara, "there are too many *dalals* (middlemen) in the honey business now...Wadhas have little to benefit from it". While the '*vyaparis*' sell the honey both within and outside the State of Gujarat, the Forest Department's sale is restricted to their souvenir shops. "Honey collected from different parts of Kutch differs in colour, determined by '*vistar*' (landscape) type..."We filter the collected honey, mix the lots together, do the packaging and sell it at Rs. 300/kg", said Anupsinh Jethwa.



ગુજરાત રાજ્ય વન વિકાસ નિગમ લી.



"ગુજરાત સરકાર હસ્તક"

"કુદરતી અને શુધ્ધ"

"વાઈલ્ડ હની"

"મધ"

તથા

"આયુર્વેદીક દવાઓ"

જામવાદી ચૂર્ણ- ડાયાબિટીસ માટે

હલચલ ચૂર્ણ- વા સાંધાના દુખાવા માટે

કંચનકાયા ચૂર્ણ- વા સાંધાના દુખાવા માટે

સિતોપલાદી ચૂર્ણ- શરદી ઉધરસ માટે

ગોખરૂ ચૂર્ણ, સુદર્શન ચૂર્ણ, ગૌણ વન પેદાશો, અરીઠા, આમળા, હરડે, તથા અનેક ...

Fig. 15: Gujarat Forest Department's advertisement poster for the sale of honey.

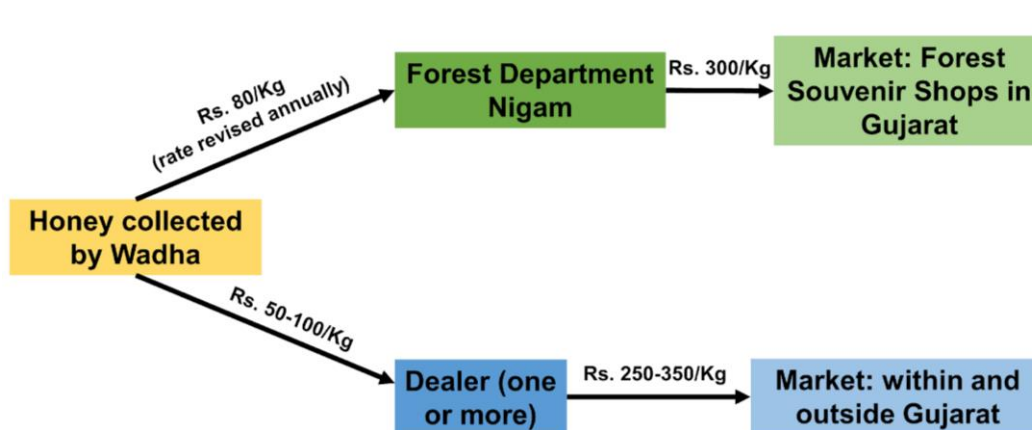


Fig. 16:

Schematic of honey supply chain in the Banni region.

Future: Dina Wadha from Madhonagar (Dumoda) said that they collect 20-30 kg of honey in a month (during my fieldwork, Wadhas from other villages collected 150-250 kg of honey through the collection season); in the past it used to be 400-450 kg. He further explained that the reason for this is because there were few *Prosopis juliflora* trees left – indicating that there is a connection between honey production and *Prosopis juliflora* extraction rates (for charcoal production). This could be relevant in light of the need for large-scale grassland restoration (*Prosopis juliflora* removal) across the Kutch landscape. Local people acknowledged that the way honey is currently being marketed is not beneficial, rather exploitative for the Wadhas – highlighting the scope for market-level intervention.

C. Gum collection

Gum collection takes place during peak summers – between April and June. Gum is secreted by native *Acacia sp.* as well as the invasive *Prosopis juliflora*. The gum of native *Acacia sp.* is of higher market value. In Banni, Wadhas predominantly collect the gum of *Prosopis juliflora*. This practice is often opportunistic, being carried out when they go into the grasslands for wood cutting or honey collection – 10-15 kg can be collected in a day. “Gund (gum), when freshly secreted is white in colour, then with time, it first turns red and then black”, said Dina Wadha, a resident of Madhonagar, Dumado. Gum is mostly sold locally at Rs. 50-80/kg (sometimes the rate becomes as low as Rs. 10/kg – the reason for this was unclear although it was understood that *Prosopis juliflora* gum is generally of lower value) or to the Forest Department Nigam. Just as in the case of honey, the market was opened after the 2017 order. Prior to this, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) could only be sold to the Nigam. The result, again as with honey, was a sharp decrease in the amount that was sold to the Nigam. “Before 2017, the Nigam received 4000-5000 quintals of *Prosopis* gum every season”, said Anupsinh Jethwa, sub-divisional manager, Gujarat Forest Nigam. He further explained that *paka* (big) trees produce more gum, but these trees declined in number drastically when their cutting for charcoal production began around 2003, reducing the trees to shrubs and affecting gum production. The Nigam invites bidders and auctions the gum off to the highest bidder. This gum finds use in the *ajrakh* print industry or as an ingredient in food or as stationery.



Fig. 17: Gum (gund) of *Prosopis juliflora*

D. Charcoal-making

Charcoal production using the traditional techniques of the region is currently the primary livelihood of the Wadhas across Kutch. It is a labour-intensive process and the Wadhas have taken it up relatively recently. “We learnt how to make *kolṣa* (charcoal) from the Kolis who came from Radhanpur, Bhachau, etc.”, said a group of Wadhas during a FGD session. Charcoal is produced by burning the wood of *Prosopis juliflora* within a kiln-like structure. The wood is first cut into smaller pieces and arranged in the form of a cone. This is then covered with jute bags and a layer of mud is added over it. A single hole at the terminal end of the cone is where the fire is set, after which the wood is allowed to burn continuously for around 8 days (yielding ~50 kg of charcoal). This duration of burning is crucial for proper charcoal formation from wood and the Wadhas must constantly be watchful to ensure that the fire doesn’t go out. While men cut the wood into smaller pieces, both men and women take part in kiln formation and supervision of the kiln during pyrolysis. Wadhas usually shift settlements when they enter contractual labour in the charcoal-making industry. For instance, several Wadha families from

Madhonagar (Dumado), who are involved in charcoal-making, live in 'jhopris' in Sarada for most of the year (except during the monsoon). In Sarada, they have entered into a contract with a 'seth' (owner of the charcoal-making area), whereby the 'seth' buys all the charcoal that they produce and then sells it to traders. The *seth* is typically a local community member (e.g., Jat Maldhari). The relationship between a Wadha and his 'seth' is built on loyalty and trust—the 'seth' lends money and provides other benefits to the Wadha in times of need and the Wadha, in return, keeps selling his produce to the same 'seth', even if someone else offers a higher rate. Charcoal is sold at rates of Rs. 300-500/40 kg during the dry season; produce during the wet season is limited and is sold at a lower price, at Rs. 100-200/kg, because of its higher moisture content. I made an interesting observation during my interviews with the Wadhas regarding charcoal-making—many of them said that there is hardly any *gaando bavar* (*Prosopis juliflora*) left and that they have to go far and wide to collect the wood necessary for manufacturing charcoal. When I pointed out that *Prosopis juliflora* occurs widely in the landscape, they countered that most of it is in the form of shrubs. To produce good quality charcoal, one requires thick and heavy wood, which can only be found in bigger trees. However, since the advent of charcoal-making in the landscape, coupled with waves of legalisation of wood harvesting, it has been lopped indiscriminately. The result of this is that while *Prosopis juliflora* continues to be widely distributed and spread within the landscape, the majority of the plant occurs in a shrub form (short with thin branches) – this form is not ideal for charcoal production.



Fig. 18: Charcoal labourers from the Wadha community preparing the production kiln



Fig. 19: A charcoal kiln in the Wadha settlement of Gorewali village



Fig. 20: Manufactured charcoal being packaged in Sarada.

E. Other livelihoods

The Wadhas of Banni are opportunistic in their sources of livelihood because most jobs are short-term. Cutting and selling wood (*Prosopis juliflora*) features among these; the wood is sold for Rs. 50-80/40 kg. Labour work is another livelihood option where the Wadhas predominantly feature. Outside Banni, many Wadhas work as labourers in agricultural fields; Wadhas in Banni were also involved in agricultural labour before these fields were taken over by the Forest Department, given the Protected Forest status of the region. Currently, some Wadhas (both men and women), especially from Madhonagar (Dumado), work as labourers in Forest Department *vaaris* (a plot earmarked for grass/fodder development), clearing the land of *Prosopis juliflora* on a yearly basis. Such labour work typically fetches them Rs. 200-300/day. Other work includes collection of *kharek* fruits (payment of Rs. 500/day), collection and sale of animal bones (livestock; Rs. 800/kg), performing *bhajans* during the tourism season (payment of Rs. 100-200/day or 6000-7000/month), and serving as drivers. Some Wadha settlements also own poultry, goats and buffaloes (each of these in small numbers); the milk and eggs are sold. Very few Wadhas have jobs in industries.



Fig. 21: Wadhas of Madhonagar removing *Prosopis juliflora* from a Forest Department *vaari*.

F. Summarising livelihoods

Table 2: Summary of estimated income from important livelihoods by the Wadhas. Information on lacquered wood items was derived from one household, honey collection from five households, gum from one household, charcoal from four households, labour work from four households and industry job from one household.

Livelihood	Output units generated per month	Cost per output unit (Rs.)	Approx. monthly income (Rs.)	Remarks
Lacquered wood-turning	~125 items	100-500/item	12,500-62,500	Figures based on data by Misariyado artisans
Honey collection	~150 kg	50-100/kg	7500-15,000	Restricted to ~3 months during summer
Gum collection	~260 kg	50-80/kg	13,000-20,800	Considering ~13 kg of gum is collected per day for 20 days a month – restricted to 2-3 months during summer
Charcoal-making	~940 kg	7.5-12.5/kg	7050-11,750	Estimates based on dry season prices
Labour work	-	200-300/day	6000-9000	-
Industry job	-	400/day	12,000	-

Table 3: Schematic calendar of Wadha livelihoods. Intensity of colour shows intensity of work.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Lacquered wood-turning*												
Honey collection												
Gum collection												
Charcoal-making												
Labour work [#]												

*3 families across Banni – peaks during tourism season; [#]labour work includes agricultural labour and other manual work (such as tree clearing from FD vaaris); [§]In settlements (e.g., Luna), where there is waterlogging during monsoons, there is no work for ~ 2 months

Table 3: shows a typical calendar year in the life of Wadhas with respect to their livelihood options. Artisans of lacquered wood-turning work year-round, with the maximum amount of work being during the tourism months of November-February. Both honey and gum collection are summer-limited professions, with the former peaking in April. Charcoal is also manufactured year-round, except for a brief period during peak monsoons. Labor work is also available year-round, peaking during the pre-rainfall season.

IV. Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Hunting and Use of Natural Resources

Wadhas are among the few traditional hunting communities of the Kutch landscape. To gain a better understanding of their socio-ecological interactions and knowledge, it is crucial to investigate their hunting practices. Hunting is legally punishable under Indian law (MoEFCC 1972), and most Wadhas are aware of this, but they hunt primarily for subsistence (with notable exceptions), often because they lack another protein source (many families cannot afford to buy meat). Some of the other communities of the region, who also hunt, do so for sport. Yet the blame for hunting invariably falls on the Wadhas (probably influenced by their low socio-economic and political status in the landscape; Chaudhury 2022). As a result, Wadhas are mostly guarded when it comes to their hunting practices, and researchers wishing to gain insights must spend substantial time building trust with the community. I gathered my information on hunting, which is summarised in the section below, from the Wadhas themselves, and from other researchers.

The hunting techniques Wadhas use depend on the game they are hunting. For big game, such as Nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), they use guns (pers. comm. Astha Chaudhary). However, over time, Nilgai have become rare in the Banni landscape and the District Collector's Office has confiscated these guns from many households. Wild pigs (*Sus scrofa*) are hunted with the help of hunting dogs. These dogs are free-ranging and comprise Taji hounds, Indian pariahs and mix-breeds. They have been trained to follow their masters into the grasslands and flush/sniff out hidden game. The Wadhas use different vocalisations to communicate specific commands to the dogs. The dogs can bring down wild pigs, which are sometimes much bigger in size, when hunting in packs. However, perhaps not so rarely, these dogs also flush out other animals, such as golden jackals (*Canis aureus*), and any animal that they flush out is killed. Literature suggests that Wadhas consume anything that they can hunt, including jackals (Kothari 2015). But as a few Wadhas told me, they only consume the meat of wild pigs, and any other non-target animal that is killed by the dogs is left untouched – although there is a lack of evidence to support this claim. The Wadhas also hunt smaller game, such as birds and reptiles, using specialised traps. For instance, spiny-tailed lizards (*Saara hardwickii*) are hunted by first fitting a wire noose at the entrance of the lizard's burrow. Then, hot water is poured directly into the burrow, and as the lizard tries to escape it gets trapped in the wire noose (pers. comm. Astha Chaudhary). Wadhas are known to trade in the lizard's oil, but I could not record this during my fieldwork. Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*) are caught by hand when they are roosting on the ground at night. My observations and conversations suggested that subsistence hunting is opportunistic in nature – it happens when the Wadhas go inside the grasslands for honey collection or wood cutting. Sometimes, they even camp within the grasslands at night along with their dogs after the day's work. There was also some evidence to suggest that some Wadhas also hunt when asked by people from other communities or from the neighbouring state of Rajasthan. The intensity of hunting and its impact on wildlife populations require separate attention.

Similar to other traditional communities in the Banni landscape, the Wadhas too are dependent on grassland resources, such as for natural remedies to diseases. "We make a paste of *mamecho*

(*Enicostema axillare*) and consume it to treat fever”, said Jetha Wadha, a resident of Hodka. This grass/herb grows right after the rains and is widely used for its medicinal properties in the landscape. The juice of *mithi jhaar* (*Salvadora oleiodes*) to cure cough and cold, application of *gud* (jaggery) and *khari tel* paste to stop bleeding and application of urine on scars to help fade the mark are some of the other local remedies followed by the Wadha people.

During our FGD sessions with the Wadhas, participants recognised that animals such as wolves (*Canis lupus*), hyaenas (*Hyaena hyaena*) and vultures (*Gyps sp.*) have either become extinct or have become very rare in the Banni landscape.

V. *Prosopis juliflora* in the lives of Wadhas

As my findings show, all the major livelihoods of the Wadha community are centred around the use of *Prosopis juliflora*. This stands in stark contrast to the other communities, for whom this plant finds very little use, and is often considered detrimental to the ecosystem. This prompted me to investigate the links between Wadhas and *Prosopis juliflora* further. When asked how the plant came into the landscape, we received mixed responses. Some said that they did not know, others said that they have been seeing the plant since their childhood (so the plant must have arrived before their birth). A few of them, mostly men, knew that it was planted. Interviewees were generally aware of the plant’s negative effects on the region – it takes up a lot of ground water, it reduces the abundance of grasses, etc. The Wadhas recognised that before the invasion Banni had an abundance of and taller grasses, interspersed with Desi Bavar (*Acacia nilotica*), Kandhi (*Prosopis cineraria*) and Kerar (*Capparis decidua*) trees.

They opined that removing *Prosopis juliflora* is very hard and shared instances when nothing else grew at removal sites until they were eventually re-invaded. But when asked if *Prosopis juliflora* had any benefits, the most common response was “*ghano faido hai (it has lots of benefits)*”. They further stressed that it provides gum, wood, etc. and is central to their livelihoods. “*If gaando bavar (Prosopis juliflora) is completely removed then what will we do?*”, expressed Birji Wadha, resident of Gorewali, when we asked if they would want the plant to be removed (as part of landscape restoration practices). “*Our livelihoods will go along with the plant*”, said Jetha Wadha in response to the same question.

VI. Future aspirations

I found very few instances where Wadhas aspired for something in their future. “*Bacche bade ho kay lakre ka kaam hi karenge, aur kya? Hum kuch aur soch sakte hai par kar toh nahi payenge (When they grow up, our children will also do charcoal work. We can think of other things, but won’t be able to do it)*”, said Ramribai, resident of Luna, in response to my question, “*What do you think your children will do when they grow up? What would you like them to become?*”. “*Aj ka aj sochte hain, kal ka nahi sochte hain (Today we do not think about tomorrow)*”, said a Wadha bhai. A Wadha behen responded, “*isliye toh hum aage nahi badh paye... (that’s why we could not progress...)*”. Years of socio-economic

suppression have largely rendered the Wadha community with low self-esteem (Kothari 2015). Yet a few people were hopeful – “I want to send my daughter to school...she should grow up to be educated”, said Valji Wadha, during an informal interview.



Fig. 23: A FGD session in the Wadha settlement of Bhirandiyara.

VII. Wadha Kolis and Sheikh Wadhas



Fig. 24: Rahim Sheikh (left) explaining the origin of Sheikhs in the Banni landscape.

Those Wadhas who were converted to Hinduism are now called Wadha Kolis – they are not related to the Koli community by origin (some of them continue going by the name Wadha instead of Wadha Koli). On the other hand, some Wadhas converted to Islam and were given the name Sheikh. My conversation with Rahim Sheikh, a resident of Dhordo, helped throw some light about the origin of the Sheikhs. Rahim claims to be a second-generation Sheikh and according to him the Wadhas in Dhordo were the first to convert to Islam in the Banni region. “Our friends in the Mutva community, upon seeing our struggles, suggested that we convert to Islam”, said Rahim Sheikh. After their conversion, the Sheikhs (Wadhas) got better support from the Mutva community, who not only accepted them into their society, but also helped them with jobs. Indeed, the men of the Sheikh household in Dhordo have jobs either in the nearby industries of Argocel and Solaris or in the tourism business (Rahim Sheikh works as a professional astrologer and is involved in Mutva mud-art work). Following Dhordo, some Wadhas in Dumado also converted to Islam and unlike the Wadhas (whose settlement is >2 Km away from the main village), the Sheikhs live within the village. The Shiekhs in Dumado are mostly involved in pastoral work and livestock (buffalo) rearing. Clearly, the socio-economic condition of the Sheikhs has improved post their conversion; Sheikhs enjoy greater social acceptance and economic opportunities as compared to Wadhas. Rahim Sheikh still has relatives in the Wadha community and “they visit each other during weddings or funerals, but Sheikhs do not eat or drink at Wadha households”.

Methodological considerations for the future

This section summarises lessons learnt through the course of this study. This might help guide future studies on the Wadha community and other such marginalised groups. I started my fieldwork with one-to-one or one-to-few informal interviews. The first challenge I faced was a language barrier (Wadhas mostly speak Kutchi). Having local field assistants helped circumvent this barrier to some extent. Yet my field assistants were either Jats or Marwaras (both communities are higher in the social hierarchy than the Wadhas) and this perhaps affected the responses of the Wadhas or their translations, in the beginning. The best results I got were when I went to the field with a Wadha as field assistant – the interviewees appeared much more relaxed, and my observations and interviews were much richer in terms of information content.

I planned the FGDs with the thought that bringing more Wadha participants together would result in more insightful conversations. However, this expectation was not fully met. In the formal set-up, the discussions were mostly one-way and the enthusiasm to converse on the side of the Wadhas seemed sub-optimal. On the other hand, there were perhaps some moments when my team and I failed to maintain a neutral position with respect to our questions and the Wadhas' responses, and this could also have had an impact. This highlights the importance of holding formal orientation sessions for the field team prior to data collection. Kutch has a diversity of distinct communities and an approach that works for one community may not work for another. Going forward, researchers and social workers should engage more one-to-one or in smaller groups at a time and explore other data collection approaches, such as life stories or time lines.



Fig. 26: FGD session with the Wadhas of Bhitara and Luna.

Recommendations

1. Cultural preservation – lacquered wood-turning

My findings show that the Wadha community seems to have co-opted elements from the cultures of the other local communities with whom they interact. Their way of life has both Hindu and Islamic aspects to it. Whether their ancestral cultural identity was different, and, if so, how different it was, remains unknown. I could not find any references to it, though we know that ancestrally the Wadhas were animists. Considered together, my findings indicate an erosion of the Wadha culture over time. Among the few aspects of their ancestral identity that remains to this day is the art of lacquered wood-turning. Yet this art has drastically declined, with the older generation being largely the group still practicing it. Hence, there is a need to preserve this practice by raising awareness and holding workshops among the youth of the Wadha community. This would not only help the Wadhas connect to their culture, but also enable constructive discussions on why this art form should continue and how the Wadhas can benefit from it economically.

2. Marketing grassland honey

Although harvesting of wild honey is among the prominent livelihoods of the Wadhas, it has three shortcomings – (1) it is a highly seasonal livelihood and cannot provide year-round economic support; (2) its supply chain is fraught with exploitative middlemen who reap the most benefit from the sale of honey, with the Wadhas themselves earning very little; and (3) the Forest Department fails to market it effectively. Yet grassland honey harvest as a livelihood option holds promise for the Wadhas. There are ample opportunities for NGOs to intervene, work with Wadha families to link them directly to the market and empower the community to manage their own sales. If this approach works at the family level, then it can be upscaled to the level of the panchayat or the whole Banni region by forming a cooperative. This could be done in a way similar to how the milk cooperative was set-up with the Maldharis in Banni. Here, one needs to be mindful that a market driven by natural resources (e.g., honey) can lead to over-exploitation of that resource. Hence, such a market cannot be demand driven, but must instead be driven by sustainable supply. Further, an intervention should not stop at establishing market linkages, but go beyond that to explore alternatives that diversify the activity, from reliance solely on bee hives in the wild to small scale backyard apiculture with native honey bees as well.

3. Reducing the impacts of hunting

I was able to document information pertaining to the animal species that are hunted and the hunting methods. But I could not assess the frequency and magnitude of hunting. Nonetheless, based on my understanding, it is likely that the impacts of hunting on wild animal populations are larger than we would assume for subsistence hunting. For instance, when hunting with dogs, many more animals may be killed than intended. Hunting is perhaps even more prevalent during the winter season when the landscape supports migratory wildlife in huge numbers. Hence, hunting is

a pressing conservation issue in the Banni landscape that needs to be addressed. There are three ways in which this can be achieved: (1) providing alternative protein source, (2) law enforcement and (3) educational engagement with children and youth. While approach (2) can help thwart hunter motivations with immediate effect, approaches (1) and (3) holds greater promise in the long-term. These approaches, if exercised in isolation may not have the desired outcome, but when carried out together, they can help control the hunting of wildlife without further marginalising the Wadha community. This can also help explore ways in which the Wadhas can be engaged in the conservation of wildlife and the grasslands, making positive use of their ecological knowledge.

4. Facilitating legal recognition of Wadhas' rights to grassland resources

The Forest Rights Act (2006) is designed to empower local communities by granting legal recognition to their sustainable use of natural resources in forest areas. In Banni, which was declared a Protected Forest, other communities who depend on the grassland for sustenance are already part of an initiative by Sahjeevan to organise them and file their claims under the FRA. Most Panchayats in Banni now have CFRMCs (Community Forest Resource Management Committees) with members from the Maldhari communities. Only one CFRMC (Gorewali) has a member from the Wadha community, who did not fully understand the implication of this when we asked him during our interviews. Hence, it will be crucial to work closely with the Wadha community to make them aware of their customary rights on the Banni grasslands and how they can claim them legally, so that they can become active members of the CFRMCs.

5. Fostering education

Most Wadhas are illiterate and their children do not go to school. When asked why they were not sending their children to school, two reasons were cited – (1) children are very much a part of the workforce in Wadha households and assist their parents in labour work and (2) those children who were sent to the school faced bullying by the children of other, socially higher communities. This is similar to the situation of the Parkara Kolis of Rapar taluka, Kutch, where literacy levels are very low. There, Gram Swaraj Sangh (GSS), an NGO, has been working with this community for several years; their focus is on education. Since the children in the Parkara Koli community did not show up for school in the NGO campus, they have been exploring other approaches that take the schools closer to the children. I also came across an instance where a Wadha woman, who had studied till class 10, has been teaching the children in her village (Bhirandiyara) with support from an organisation. These tried and tested approaches could serve as a blueprint to develop education camps for Banni's Wadha children.

6. Sanitation and health interventions

Past work has noted the prevalence of poor hygiene among Wadhas (Bhingardive et al. n.d). I observed a similar trend. While some settlements have the occasional facility of medical camps, others do not. Many Wadhas rely on *desi ilach* (traditional medicine) to treat diseases. They do go

to nearby clinics or hospitals, but this is largely for emergencies. I noted skin infections, breathing trouble, alcoholism and other medical issues among people in the Wadha community. Additionally, many Wadha settlements face acute water shortages, which also affects daily hygiene. These are things that require sustained intervention, such as through the organisation of regular medical camps and workshops on hygiene.

Conclusion

The Wadha community of Banni and elsewhere in Kutch is quite distinct from the other communities inhabiting the region. Unlike most other communities, the women in Wadha households are actively involved in livelihood earning – women have a role to play in most Wadha livelihoods. While the nature of their relationship with the dominant Maldhari community has undergone changes, the Wadhas still retain some connections with them. For instance, they are given milk or buttermilk by Maldhari households free of charge. The way Wadhas understand their ecosystem is starkly different to other local communities. For instance, they value *Prosopis juliflora*, an invasive plant, for its usefulness in driving their livelihoods, while other communities look at it largely in a negative way for its adverse impact on pastures for grazing and biodiversity of grasses. Unlike the Maldharis, they are also not against developmental projects in the area, such as the Cheetah breeding centre, for these projects might provide them additional sources of income as labourers or caretakers/guards. The Wadha community is extremely marginalised in the Banni landscape and that perhaps informs their perceptions of the changes happening around them. Interventions to uplift them both socially and economically would require long-term collaborative commitment.

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