

**Displacement and the Reshaping of
Indigenous Livelihoods: A Review of
the Literature on Mumbai's Koli
and Agri Communities**

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Abstract

The Koli and Agri communities have occupied a visibly glaring space in the landscape of Mumbai since time immemorial. They have made their presence felt not only demographically, but also culturally and politically. However, despite being the city's age-old inhabitants and landowners, both communities have been pushed to the margins for various reasons. From facing a serious bout of identity crisis to being introduced to other religions, the Koli and Agri communities are plagued with a whole host of problems. As a permanent solution to these problems and also for a sense of security, the two communities have chosen to assimilate and subsequently integrate into the mainstream religions like Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. In the course of time, they face marginalization in different forms, particularly becoming victims of land displacement, which hindered their livelihood. This article reviews various texts that trace this process of assimilation, integration, and consequent marginalization of the Agri and Koli communities. From tracing their origins in Mumbai to examining their current status in various literary texts, the article offers a brief primary-data review of both communities.

Keywords

Koli and Agri, Urban displacement, Indigenous communities, Mumbai, Assimilation, Marginalization.

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1. Introduction

The literature review is one of the most intellectually demanding and analytically significant components of academic research. Far from being a mere cataloging exercise in which existing scholarship is listed and summarised in sequence, a well-constructed literature review serves as the epistemological and theoretical scaffolding upon which the entire edifice of a scholarly argument rests. As Hart (2018) has argued, the literature review is not a passive recounting of what others have said; it is an active, critical engagement with the intellectual traditions, methodological approaches, and substantive findings that define a discipline at a given historical moment.

For the present study, which investigates the processes of assimilation, integration, and marginalization experienced by the Koli and Agri communities of Mumbai, the literature review is particularly significant for several interrelated reasons. First, these communities represent what may be termed indigenous or autochthonous populations of the Mumbai region, peoples whose histories, livelihoods, and cultural practices are intimately tied to the coastal and agrarian ecologies that predated the emergence of the city as a colonial and post-colonial metropolis.

Second, assimilation, integration, and marginalization are not static conditions but dynamic, historically contingent processes that unfold differently across spatial, temporal, and social contexts. The challenge for the present study is to remain attentive to the specificities of the Mumbai context, where colonial urbanization, post-colonial industrialization, and neoliberal restructuring have created a distinctive landscape of opportunity and dispossession. The review engages with the substantial literature on development-induced displacement in India, then narrows its focus to Mumbai's historical development and the specific experiences of its Koli and Agri communities.

However, it is imperative to keep in the background of the entire article David Harvey's Right to the city. David Harvey's "right to the city" reframes urban space as a collective rather than individual entitlement - not merely a right to access existing city resources, but a right to actively shape and remake the city according to the needs and desires of its inhabitants. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's original formulation, Harvey argues that urbanization

has historically been driven by the absorption of surplus capital, producing cities that serve accumulation rather than the people who live in them - displacing the poor, commodifying housing, and privatizing public space. For Harvey, reclaiming the right to the city means challenging this capitalist logic of urban development and asserting democratic control over the processes of urbanization itself, making it a fundamentally political and collective struggle rather than a legal or individual claim. This framework has been widely taken up in critiques of gentrification, eviction, and displacement in cities like Mumbai, where informal settlements and resettlement politics sit directly at the intersection of capital accumulation and the right to inhabit urban space.

2. Indigenous Communities of Mumbai

The Koli and Agri communities are among the oldest inhabitants of the Mumbai region, with histories that predate the city's emergence as a colonial and post-colonial metropolis by several centuries. Their distinctive cultures, occupational practices, and patterns of settlement have been shaped by the coastal and agrarian ecologies of the Bombay archipelago, and their experiences of urbanization, development, and displacement reflect the broader dynamics through which indigenous communities in the global South have been incorporated into, and often marginalized by, the processes of urban growth and economic modernization. This section reviews the available scholarly literature on the Koli and Agri communities, examining their historical origins, social organization, occupational practices, cultural life, and the contemporary challenges they face in the context of Mumbai's ongoing urban transformation.

3. The Koli Community

3.1 Historical Origins and Social Organization

The Koli community is widely recognized as one of the oldest and most culturally distinctive communities of the Mumbai region. The origins of the Koli Community remain a subject of considerable scholarly debate, with some authorities tracing their ancestry to the aboriginal inhabitants of India's western coast, while others suggest a more complex history of migration, intermarriage, and cultural synthesis. Enthoven (1920), in his comprehensive ethnographic survey of the tribes and castes of Bombay, identified the Kolis as a heterogeneous group, encompassing a range of sub-castes and territorial divisions, including the Son Koli, the Kharva Koli, the Mangela Koli, and the Mahadev Koli, each with its own distinctive customs, dialect, and social organization. Ghurye (1969), in his monograph on the Mahadev Kolis, provided a detailed account of the social structure, religious practices, and economic life of one of the major Koli sub-groups, documenting the complex interplay between tribal and caste identities that has characterized Koli social organization.

The social organization of the Koli community has traditionally been characterized by a strong sense of territorial identity, with individual koliwadadas functioning as semi-autonomous social units, each with its own traditions, deities, and patterns of internal governance. The koliwada, or Koli village, is not merely a residential settlement but a comprehensive social world, encompassing community members' dwellings, spaces for work and leisure, shrines and temples dedicated to community deities, and landing places and boat sheds where fishing activities are organized. The social life of the koliwada has traditionally revolved around a calendar of religious festivals, including Narali Pournima, which celebrates the beginning of the fishing season after the monsoon, and the Holi and Ganpati festivals, which provide occasions for communal celebration and reinforce social bonds. Puneekar (1959), in her study of the Son Kolis of Bombay, documented the importance of these festivals for the maintenance of community identity and social cohesion, arguing that they served as mechanisms through which the Koli community articulated its distinctive cultural identity in the face of the homogenising pressures of urban life.

3.2 Occupation, Economy, and Livelihood

Fishing has been the traditional occupation of the Koli community for centuries, and the economic life of the koliwadadas has traditionally been organized around the rhythms and requirements of the fishing calendar. The methods of fishing employed by the Koli community are diverse, ranging from small-scale, shore-based fishing using cast nets and hand lines to more ambitious deep-sea fishing expeditions using motorized boats and sophisticated navigational equipment. The work of Vicziany (1986) provided a detailed account of the economic organization of the Bombay fishery, documenting the complex system of credit, marketing, and labour allocation that structured the relationship between boat owners, crew members, fish merchants, and wholesale traders. Her analysis highlighted the vulnerability of the Koli fishing economy to fluctuations in fish stocks, market prices, and weather conditions, and documented the growing pressure on marine resources resulting from the expansion of industrial fishing, pollution, and the destruction of mangrove forests and coral reefs.

The contemporary challenges facing the Koli fishing economy are formidable and multidimensional. The decline of fish stocks in the waters surrounding Mumbai, driven by overfishing, industrial pollution, and the destruction of coastal habitats, has significantly reduced the productivity of traditional fishing grounds, forcing many Koli fishermen to venture farther from shore in search of viable catches, often at considerable cost and risk. The construction of the Mumbai Coastal Road and other infrastructure projects along the city's shoreline has further disrupted fishing activities, destroying breeding grounds, obstructing navigation routes, and restricting access to

traditional landing sites. Scholarly analyses and community reports have documented the impact of the Coastal Regulation Zone notifications on the Koli fishing community, arguing that the regulatory framework, while ostensibly designed to protect the coastal environment, has had the unintended consequence of restricting the traditional activities of fishing communities while doing little to curb the more destructive practices of industrial and commercial interests (Government of Maharashtra, 2016). The growing import of fish from other parts of India and from abroad has also affected the competitiveness of locally caught fish, putting further downward pressure on prices and profit margins.

3.3 Political Participation and Social Change

The Koli community has a long history of political engagement and collective action, both within the formal structures of democratic politics and through informal mechanisms of community mobilization and resistance. Vicziany (1986), in her analysis of the limits of traditional politics among the Bombay fishermen, documented the ways in which the Koli community sought to articulate its interests through the existing political system, including the formation of community-based organizations, the cultivation of relationships with political parties and elected representatives, and the use of petitions, protests, and legal challenges to resist the encroachment of development projects on their lands and fishing grounds. Her analysis revealed the structural constraints that limited the effectiveness of these strategies, including the fragmentation of the Koli community along sub-caste and territorial lines, the relative weakness of the community's position within the broader political economy of Mumbai, and the tendency of political parties to co-opt community leaders without addressing the substantive grievances of the community as a whole.

Contemporary scholarship on the Koli community has documented the complex and often contradictory processes of social change that have characterized the community's engagement with urban modernity. Ranade (2008), in a study drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in multiple koliwadās, documented the growing occupational diversification among younger generations of Koli families, many of whom have pursued higher education and entered the formal sector economy, often in occupations far removed from traditional fishing. This occupational diversification, while offering new economic opportunities, has also created tensions within families and communities as younger community members navigate competing demands of traditional expectations and modern aspirations. The relationship between education, employment, and community identity among the Kolis remains under-researched, with significant implications for understanding the long-term trajectory of community change.

4. The Agri Community

4.1 Historical Origins and the Salt-Pan Economy

The Agri community, like the Koli community, has a long and deeply rooted history in the Mumbai region. The name Agri is derived from the Sanskrit term *agara*, meaning salt pan, reflecting the community's traditional association with salt production, an occupation that has been practised in the coastal lowlands of the Bombay archipelago for centuries. Enthoven (1920) documented the social organization and economic practices of the Agri community, describing a community whose livelihood was intimately tied to the tidal rhythms and saline soils of the coastal zone, and whose seasonal cycle of work was organized around the production of salt during the dry months and the cultivation of rice and vegetables during the monsoon season. The salt produced by the Agri community was historically an important commodity, traded extensively within the western Indian Ocean world and contributing significantly to the regional economy.

The salt-pan economy of the Agri community represents a distinctive form of livelihood that has been shaped by the specific ecological conditions of the Mumbai coastal zone. The production of salt requires access to flat, low-lying land that is periodically inundated by tidal waters, conditions that are found in the areas between the original seven islands of Bombay and in the broader metropolitan region, including Thane, Mira-Bhayander, and Navi Mumbai. Salt production involves a complex series of steps, including building bunds and channels to control tidal flow, evaporating salt water in a series of graduated pans, and harvesting, drying, and storing the finished product. This process requires not only specialized ecological knowledge but also collective forms of labour organization, as the construction and maintenance of salt pans typically involve the cooperation of multiple families and the sharing of equipment, water rights, and marketing arrangements.

4.2 Social Organization and Identity

The social organization of the Agri community has traditionally been characterized by a combination of territorial identity and caste-based social structure. The *gaothan*, or Agri village, has functioned as the primary unit of social organisation, providing the physical and social context within which community life is conducted. Unlike the *koliwadas* of the Koli community, which are typically located along the coastline and oriented towards the sea, the *gaothans* of the Agri community are typically located inland, in areas where agricultural land and salt pans were historically available. The Agri community has its own distinctive cultural practices, including the worship of local deities, the observance of community-specific festivals, and the maintenance of oral traditions that recount the community's history and its relationship to the land.

The question of Agri identity has become increasingly contested in the context of Mumbai's urban transformation. The Agri community's claim to indigeneity, like that of the Koli community, is rooted in the historical depth of their connection to the land, a connection that predates the emergence of the city by several centuries. However, the Agri community's identity has been complicated by the process of Sanskritization, through which some Agri families have sought to raise their social status by adopting the customs, rituals, and caste names associated with higher-status groups within the Hindu social hierarchy. This process, which Srinivas (1956, 1966) described and theorised in his influential work on social change in India, has been documented among the Agri community by several scholars, who have noted the adoption of Brahminical rituals, the restriction of widow remarriage, and the adoption of vegetarianism among some sections of the community. The relationship between Sanskritization, social mobility, and the maintenance of community identity among the Agris remains a complex and under-researched area.

4.3 Occupational Transition & Contemporary Transformations

The contemporary economic condition of the Agri community is characterised by a profound and ongoing process of occupational transition, driven by the progressive loss of agricultural and salt-pan land to urban development, the declining profitability of traditional occupations, and the growing attractiveness of urban employment for younger members of the community. The conversion of salt-pan land and agricultural land to residential, commercial, and industrial use has been one of the most significant drivers of economic change for the Agri community, depriving many families of their primary source of livelihood and forcing them to seek alternative sources of income. The Agri communities of Mira-Bhayander, Thane, and Navi Mumbai, which historically had some of the most productive salt-pan lands in the Mumbai metropolitan region, have been particularly affected, as the city's rapid suburban expansion has progressively encroached on their traditional lands.

The occupational diversification of the Agri community has taken a variety of forms, including wage labour in the construction and service sectors, small-scale entrepreneurship, and, for a growing minority, higher education and professional employment. However, the transition from traditional to modern occupations has not been smooth or equitable. Many Agri families, displaced from their lands without adequate compensation or rehabilitation, have found themselves in a position of economic vulnerability, lacking the skills, education, and social networks required to compete effectively in the urban labour market. The experience of the Agri project-affected persons of Navi Mumbai, documented by Parasuraman (1999) and others, illustrates the challenges faced by communities undergoing

forced occupational transition, including prolonged unemployment, underemployment, and the erosion of community-based forms of social support.

The gender dimensions of occupational transition among the Agri community warrant particular attention. In the traditional economy of salt production and agriculture, gender roles were relatively clearly defined, with men and women performing different but complementary tasks within the household production unit. Women's labour was central to the salt-production process, involving tasks such as the raking and harvesting of salt, the maintenance of bunds and channels, and the management of household finances. The transition from household-based production to wage employment in the formal sector has disrupted these gendered divisions of labour, creating new patterns of male and female employment, household income management, and domestic responsibility. The limited available evidence suggests that Agri women have faced particular challenges in the urban labour market, including lower wages, poorer working conditions, and greater vulnerability to exploitation, while also bearing a disproportionate burden of the unpaid domestic and care work that sustains the household. These gendered dimensions of occupational transition represent an important area for further research, as the existing scholarly literature on the Agri community has paid insufficient attention to the differential experiences of men and women in the process of community transformation.

5. Literature on Development-Induced Displacement in Mumbai

The scholarly literature on development-induced displacement in Mumbai is extensive and multifaceted, reflecting the city's long history of urban transformation, its role as India's financial and commercial capital, and the intensity of the conflicts over land, space, and livelihood that have characterised its development. This section reviews the major literature on specific development projects and processes that have affected the Koli and Agri communities, examining the empirical findings, theoretical implications, and policy debates that have emerged from this work.

5.1 Koliwadas and Gaothans under Threat

The koliwadas and gaothans of Mumbai represent a distinctive form of urban settlement increasingly threatened by urban redevelopment and infrastructure expansion. These settlements, which predate the colonial and postcolonial city, occupy some of the most valuable land in the Mumbai metropolitan region, including coastal areas with commanding views of the Arabian Sea, low-lying areas suitable for reclamation and development, and suburban areas with high potential for residential and commercial construction. The growing value of this land, driven by the speculative dynamics of Mumbai's real-estate market, has created powerful incentives

for the acquisition and redevelopment of koliwadās and gaothans, often in disregard of the rights and needs of the communities that inhabit them.

Appadurai (2000), in his influential essay on spectral housing and urban cleansing in millennial Mumbai, provided a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics through which established communities are rendered invisible and illegitimate within the dominant narratives of urban progress. His concept of spectral housing refers to the condition of communities whose presence in the urban landscape is acknowledged only to be negated, who are treated as ghosts haunting the spaces that the city wishes to claim for its own purposes. This concept is directly applicable to the situation of Mumbai's koliwadās and gaothans, which are often depicted in planning documents and media representations as obsolete, encroaching, or out of place, even as the communities that inhabit them continue to assert their historical claims to the land and their right to remain *in situ*. Scholarly and activist accounts have documented the specific ways in which the Coastal Regulation Zone notifications have been used to restrict the activities of fishing communities while facilitating the construction of high-value commercial and residential developments in adjacent areas, a pattern that illustrates the uneven application of environmental regulation in the service of powerful economic interests (Sampat, 2012).

5.2 The Navi Mumbai Project and Project-Affected Persons

The development of Navi Mumbai, planned as a counter-magnet to the congested island city, represents one of the most significant episodes of development-induced displacement in the history of the Mumbai metropolitan region. Conceived in the early 1970s and implemented by the City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO), the project involved acquiring approximately 159 villages and displacing an estimated 117,000 families, a significant proportion of whom belonged to the Agri community (Fernandes, 2008). The land acquisition and resettlement process for the Navi Mumbai project has drawn considerable scholarly attention, with studies documenting inadequate compensation, failed resettlement policies, and the long-term socio-economic consequences of displacement for affected communities.

Ethnographic and survey-based studies of the Navi Mumbai project-affected persons have provided detailed accounts of the lived experience of displacement and the strategies through which displaced Agri families sought to reconstruct their lives in the new urban environment (Parasuraman, 1999; Fernandes, 2008). These analyses have highlighted the disjunction between the abstract, standardized categories of state planning, which treated displaced persons as undifferentiated units of population to be relocated and compensated, and the complex, differentiated realities of community life, in which land, livelihood, and identity were intertwined in

ways that could not be captured by the bureaucratic categories of compensation and rehabilitation. The experience of the Navi Mumbai project-affected persons, as documented by these and other scholars, illustrates a recurring pattern in which the benefits of large-scale urban development accrue primarily to new migrants, investors, and developers, while the costs are borne disproportionately by the original inhabitants of the land.

5.3 The Coastal Road Project and Other Mega-Infrastructure

The Mumbai Coastal Road Project, a 29.2-kilometer roadway connecting south Mumbai to the western suburbs, represents one of the most contested infrastructure projects in the city's recent history. The project, which involves extensive land reclamation along the city's western coastline, has been opposed by environmental activists, fishing communities, and civil society organizations on grounds that include the destruction of marine biodiversity, the disruption of fishing activities, the inadequacy of environmental impact assessments, and the disproportionate burden that the project places on marginalized coastal communities. The scholarly and activist literature on the Coastal Road project has highlighted the ways in which the project exemplifies a broader pattern of urban development in Mumbai, in which the demands of automobile-dependent middle-class commuters are privileged over the livelihoods and environments of fishing communities and other marginalized urban populations.

The Metro rail project and the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) schemes represent additional vectors of development-induced displacement that have affected the Koli and Agri communities, albeit in different ways. The Metro construction has involved the acquisition of land and the demolition of structures in areas adjacent to or overlapping with koliwadadas, while the SRA schemes, which are intended to provide formal housing to slum dwellers through the mechanism of cross-subsidized redevelopment, have been criticized for their failure to address the specific needs of koliwada residents, whose patterns of settlement, occupation, and community life are fundamentally different from those of the typical slum household (Patel et al., 2002). The work of Mukhija (2003) on slum redevelopment in Mumbai provided a critical analysis of the SRA model, arguing that its emphasis on the provision of individual housing units, combined with its reliance on market mechanisms and private-sector participation, has produced outcomes that are inequitable and that fail to address the structural causes of urban poverty and inadequate housing.

5.4 Port Expansion and Special Economic Zones

The expansion of the Mumbai Port Trust and the development of the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust at Nhava Sheva have had significant consequences for the coastal ecology and for the livelihoods of the Koli fishing communities that operate in the waters adjacent to the port facilities. Dredging

shipping channels, constructing berths and container terminals, and increasing maritime traffic have all contributed to marine degradation, reducing fish stocks and creating navigational hazards for small-scale fishing vessels. The development of special economic zones in the Mumbai metropolitan region, including those planned for areas adjacent to Agri salt-pan lands, represents a further threat to the livelihoods and territories of indigenous communities, as SEZ development typically involves the acquisition of large areas of land, the provision of tax incentives and regulatory concessions to private investors, and the creation of enclaves of economic activity that are physically and administratively separated from the surrounding areas.

Chatterjee (2014), in her analysis of de-colonising the city and urban planning in post-colonial Bombay, highlighted the continuities between colonial and post-colonial approaches to urban planning, arguing that the post-colonial state has inherited and intensified the colonial tendency to treat the city as an object of technical management rather than a lived social environment shaped by the histories, aspirations, and struggles of its inhabitants. This perspective is directly relevant to the analysis of SEZ development and port expansion, which are typically justified in the language of economic growth, employment generation, and global competitiveness, but which have the effect of further marginalizing communities whose claims to land and livelihood are perceived as incompatible with the demands of the global economy. The work of Sampat (2012) on the political economy of land acquisition in India provided additional evidence of the ways in which the legal and administrative frameworks governing land acquisition for SEZs and other development projects create structural incentives for the dispossession of marginalized communities.

6. Land Issues

6.1 Land Alienation and the Politics of Ownership

The question of land ownership and land alienation is perhaps the most fundamental issue confronting the Koli and Agri communities of Mumbai. Despite their historical presence in the region, many Koli and Agri families lack formal title to the land they occupy, a consequence of the colonial and post-colonial legal frameworks that have consistently privileged formal, documented forms of property rights over customary and occupancy-based forms of tenure. The absence of formal title makes these communities vulnerable to state land acquisition and encroachment by private developers, who exploit legal ambiguity around the status of *koliwadas* and *gaothans* to advance their own claims to the land. Mukhija (2003), in his study of slum redevelopment in Mumbai, documented the complex and often contradictory ways in which the absence of formal property rights affects the lives and livelihoods of urban communities, noting that the lack of legal title,

while rendering communities vulnerable to displacement, also creates opportunities for collective mobilization and the assertion of de facto ownership through occupation and community organization.

The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notifications, issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, add another dimension to the land question by affecting the Koli and Agri communities. The CRZ framework, which restricts development activities within specified distances from the high-tide line, was designed to protect the coastal environment from the damaging effects of unregulated construction and industrial activity. However, as analyses of the CRZ framework have demonstrated, it has had the paradoxical effect of restricting the traditional activities of fishing communities, including the construction and repair of boats, the drying of fish, and the expansion of dwelling space, while providing inadequate protection against the more destructive impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects, industrial pollution, and real-estate development. The politics of the CRZ, in which environmental protection, community rights, and development interests intersect and conflict, illustrates the broader dilemma faced by indigenous communities in Mumbai: that the legal and regulatory frameworks ostensibly designed to protect them often have the unintended consequence of further constraining their autonomy and restricting their access to the resources upon which their livelihoods depend.

6.2 Real Estate Pressures and Gentrification

The explosive growth of Mumbai's real-estate market has created enormous pressures on the remaining koliwadās and gaothans, which occupy some of the most sought-after land in the metropolitan region. The concept of gentrification, originally developed by Smith (1979, 2002) to describe the process by which capital flows back into the urban core, displacing working-class residents and transforming the social and physical character of neighbourhoods, provides a useful, if imperfect, framework for understanding these pressures. In Mumbai, gentrification takes distinctive forms, shaped by the dynamics of the Indian real-estate market, the legal and regulatory framework governing land use and development, and the cultural politics of community, identity, and heritage surrounding the koliwadās and gaothans.

Smith (2002) argued that gentrification should be understood as a global urban strategy, driven by the efforts of urban governments to attract capital investment and to reposition their cities within the hierarchies of global economic competition. In Mumbai, this global strategy has manifested itself in the construction of luxury residential towers, shopping malls, and entertainment complexes, often on or adjacent to land historically occupied by Koli and Agri communities. The case of Worli Koliwada, where the construction of high-rise residential towers has dramatically altered the

physical and social landscape surrounding the traditional settlement, exemplifies the dynamics of gentrification as they affect Mumbai's indigenous communities. The juxtaposition of traditional koliwada structures and gleaming glass-and-steel towers creates a visual representation of the inequality and displacement that characterize Mumbai's contemporary urban development, a juxtaposition that has been analyzed by scholars including Banerjee-Guha (2002) and Anjaria (2016) in their studies of the spatial politics of Mumbai.

7. Occupational Challenges

7.1 Decline of Fishing and Marine Livelihoods

The decline of the fishing economy is one of the most consequential and well-documented challenges facing the Koli community. Multiple factors have contributed to this decline, including the overexploitation of fish stocks by industrial trawlers, the pollution of coastal waters by industrial effluents and domestic sewage, the destruction of mangrove forests and other critical coastal habitats, the disruption of fishing activities by infrastructure development, and the increasing costs of fishing equipment and fuel. Vicziany (1986) documented the vulnerability of the Bombay fishery to these pressures as early as the 1980s, and subsequent studies have confirmed that the situation has continued to deteriorate, with significant consequences for the economic viability of traditional fishing and for the communities that depend upon it.

The occupational diversification that has accompanied the decline of fishing has taken multiple forms, including wage labour in the construction, transport, and service sectors, small-scale trade and entrepreneurship, and, for a growing minority, higher education and professional employment. However, the transition from fishing to other occupations has been neither smooth nor equitable. Older members of the community, who have spent their entire working lives in the fishing economy, often lack the skills and education required to compete in the formal sector labour market, while younger members, who may have acquired education and training, frequently face discrimination and social exclusion in the urban workplace. The loss of fishing as a primary occupation also has significant cultural implications, as it severs the connection between the community and the sea that has been central to Koli identity for centuries, undermining the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge and eroding the social and cultural practices that have historically sustained community life.

7.2 Decline of Salt Production and Agricultural Practices

The decline of salt production and agriculture among the Agri community mirrors, in important respects, the decline of fishing among the Kolis, though the specific dynamics and timelines differ. The conversion of

salt-pan land and agricultural land to urban use has been the primary driver of occupational decline for the Agri community, as the expanding urban footprint of Mumbai has progressively encroached upon the low-lying coastal areas where salt production and agriculture have traditionally been practised. Competition from industrially produced salt, which benefits from economies of scale and government subsidies unavailable to small-scale traditional producers, has further undermined the economic viability of traditional salt production, making it an increasingly marginal activity even where land remains available.

The occupational transition experienced by the Agri community has been documented in a number of studies, though the scholarly literature on the Agris is considerably less extensive than that on the Kolis, reflecting the Agri community's relative invisibility within broader scholarship on Mumbai's indigenous populations. Studies of the project-affected persons of Navi Mumbai, including those drawing upon CIDCO's own resettlement records, provide some of the most detailed available evidence on the consequences of displacement for Agri families, documenting the loss of land, the inadequacy of compensation, the challenges of adapting to urban livelihoods, and the long-term social and economic consequences of forced occupational transition. Additional research is needed to document the experiences of Agri communities in other parts of the Mumbai metropolitan region, including Mira-Bhayander, Thane, and the remaining salt-pan areas of the island city, where urban development pressures continue to threaten traditional livelihoods.

8. Identity and Culture

8.1 Assimilation and Sanskritization

The processes of assimilation and Sanskritization have played significant roles in shaping the contemporary identities of the Koli and Agri communities. Assimilation, as conceptualized by Gordon (1964), refers to the process by which a minority or marginalized group progressively adopts the cultural norms, values, and practices of the dominant society, losing its distinctive cultural identity in the process. Gordon identified seven dimensions of assimilation, ranging from cultural or behavioural assimilation, involving the adoption of the language, dress, and customs of the dominant group, to structural assimilation, involving the entry of minority group members into the social institutions and organizations of the dominant society, to marital assimilation, involving intermarriage between members of the minority and majority groups. For the Koli and Agri communities, the process of assimilation has been driven by multiple factors, including the expansion of formal education, the influence of mass media, the growing participation of community members in the urban economy,

and the erosion of the spatial and occupational boundaries that historically separated these communities from the broader urban society.

Sanskritization, the process through which lower-caste groups adopt the customs, rituals, and social practices associated with higher-caste groups in an effort to improve their social status, represents a distinctive form of cultural change that is specific to the Indian context. Srinivas (1956, 1966), who coined the term and developed the concept, argued that Sanskritization was one of the primary mechanisms of social mobility in the Indian caste system, enabling lower-caste groups to achieve a higher social standing without challenging the fundamental principles of the caste hierarchy. Both the Koli and Agri communities have exhibited tendencies towards Sanskritization, adopting Brahminical rituals, restricting widow remarriage, adopting vegetarianism, and claiming Kshatriya status within the Hindu social order. However, the extent and significance of Sanskritization have varied across communities, localities, and generations, and the relationship between Sanskritization and the broader processes of urbanization, modernization, and marginalization that affect these communities remains a complex and contested area of scholarly inquiry.

8.2 Religious Transformation and Cultural Erosion

Religious transformation among the Koli and Agri communities reflects the broader dynamics of cultural change that have characterized their engagement with urban modernity. The traditional religious practices of both communities are characterized by a distinctive blend of animistic, folk, and Brahminical elements, including the worship of local deities and spirits, the observance of community-specific festivals, and the maintenance of sacred sites and shrines that are intimately connected to the local landscape. The process of religious transformation has involved, on the one hand, the adoption of more standardized, text-based forms of Hinduism, often promoted by religious reform movements and organizations that seek to bring marginalized communities within the fold of mainstream Hindu practice. On the other hand, it has involved the growing influence of other religious traditions, including Islam and Christianity, particularly in areas where the pressures of urban poverty and social exclusion have created conditions favourable to religious conversion.

Cultural erosion, understood as the progressive loss of distinctive cultural practices, knowledge systems, and forms of social organization, represents one of the most profound and consequential dimensions of the marginalization experienced by the Koli and Agri communities. The loss of traditional ecological knowledge about the sea, the coastline, and the salt pans; the decline of community-specific festivals, rituals, and oral traditions; the erosion of community-based forms of governance and collective decision-making; and the weakening of inter-generational bonds and the

transmission of cultural values from older to younger generations, all represent forms of cultural loss that are intimately connected to the broader processes of displacement, occupational change, and social transformation that have been documented in the preceding sections. Barth (1969), in his influential analysis of ethnic groups and boundaries, argued that ethnic identity is maintained not through the preservation of cultural content but through the maintenance of social boundaries that define the group and regulate interaction between groups. From this perspective, the question for the Koli and Agri communities is not merely whether their cultural practices are being preserved but whether the social boundaries that define their communities as distinct collective entities are being maintained, eroded, or transformed in the context of Mumbai's urban development.

9. Research Gap

The preceding review of the literature reveals a substantial and growing body of scholarship on the processes of urbanization, development, and displacement in Mumbai, and on the histories, cultures, and contemporary challenges of the Koli and Agri communities. However, a careful and critical assessment of this literature also reveals several significant gaps, lacunae, and areas of scholarly neglect that the present study seeks to address. The identification of these research gaps is not merely an academic exercise in cataloging what has not yet been studied; it is a fundamental step in establishing the rationale, significance, and original contribution of the present research.

First, and most significantly, there is a striking absence of comparative studies that examine the experiences of the Koli and Agri communities in relation to one another. The available literature treats these communities largely in isolation, with studies focusing either on the Kolis or on the Agris, but rarely on both. This is a significant omission, given that both communities share a common historical relationship to the Mumbai region, both have been affected by similar processes of urbanization, development, and displacement, and both face comparable challenges of land alienation, occupational decline, and cultural erosion. A comparative analysis of the two communities would enable the identification of similarities and differences in their experiences of assimilation, integration, and marginalization, shedding light on the factors that mediate the impact of urban development on different communities and on the ways in which specific occupational traditions, cultural practices, and social organisational forms shape the trajectory of community change. The present study addresses this gap by examining the Koli and Agri communities within a single analytical framework, enabling systematic comparison across a range of dimensions.

Second, the existing literature on Mumbai's indigenous communities has not adequately addressed the triadic relationship between assimilation,

integration, and marginalization that is the central concern of this review. While individual studies have documented aspects of cultural assimilation, economic integration, and social marginalization, these processes have not been systematically analyzed in relation to one another, nor has sufficient attention been paid to the ways in which they interact, reinforce, and contradict one another. For example, the adoption of mainstream cultural practices by members of indigenous communities, conventionally understood as a form of assimilation, may also represent a form of social integration, enabling community members to participate more fully in the economic and political life of the city. Conversely, economic integration into the urban labour market may be accompanied by cultural marginalization, as community members who enter the formal economy are forced to abandon the cultural practices and social relationships that define their community identity. A systematic analysis of these interactions and contradictions is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary condition of the Koli and Agri communities.

Third, there is a notable absence of longitudinal studies that trace the processes of change experienced by Mumbai's indigenous communities over time. The available literature is dominated by cross-sectional studies that provide a snapshot of community conditions at a particular point in time, but do not capture the dynamic, processual character of community transformation. This is a significant limitation, because the processes of assimilation, integration, and marginalization unfold over extended periods of time, often across multiple generations, and their full consequences may not be apparent from a single point of observation.

Fourth, the sociological understanding of development-induced displacement in the Mumbai context remains underdeveloped. While there is a substantial body of policy-oriented and activist literature on displacement in Mumbai, much of this literature is descriptive and advocacy-oriented, lacking the theoretical depth and analytical rigour that characterize the best sociological scholarship. The application of sociological theories of community change, social marginalization, and cultural transformation to the specific context of development-induced displacement in Mumbai has been limited and fragmented.

Fifth, the voices and perspectives of the community members themselves have been inadequately represented in the existing scholarly literature. While ethnographic studies by scholars including Vicziany (1986) and Ranade (2008) have made important contributions to documenting the lived experiences of Koli and Agri communities, there remains a tendency in much of the literature to treat community members as objects of analysis rather than as agents of their own transformation. The present study addresses this gap by adopting a methodology that prioritizes the voices,

narratives, and perspectives of community members, seeking to understand the processes of assimilation, integration, and marginalization not only from the standpoint of the external observer but also from the standpoint of those who experience these processes directly.

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