

The Gonds



The principal tribe of the Dravidian family, the Gonds stand out among the various tribes of India, by their numbers, the vast expanse of their habitat and their historical importance. Although spread over Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, and in small and scattered pockets of parts of Assam, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, the majority of Gonds today are found in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In Madhya Pradesh, they are concentrated in the Satpura plateau (Chhindwara, Betul, Harda, Hoshangabad, Seoni and Narsimhapur) and Mandla. There is no district however, which does not have some Gonds. This is because of their numbers and the fact that the Gond Dynasties possessed a great part of the territory of the erstwhile Central Provinces, formerly known as Gondwana, or the country of Gonds.

As per the 1991 census the population of Gonds in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh was between 52 and 53 lakhs. Table 1 gives the population of Gonds in Madhya Pradesh (prior to the reorganisation of the state) and the three study districts.

Table 1 : Population of Gonds

	Madhya Pradesh*	Betul	Hoshangabad	Chhindwara
Rural	51,85,797	2,34,848	80,489	3,15,777
Urban	1,64,086	7,272	4,289	16,982
Total	53,49,883	2,42,120	84,778	3,32,759

* Including Chhattisgarh

The Gonds are an agro-silvicultural community. While their forest dependence is high, the Gonds are mainly engaged in agriculture and a majority of them are farm workers and wage labourers. In the hilly tracts, most of the Gonds are landowners and cultivate their own land. In the spring months they migrate to the Narmada plains for the wheat harvest. This annual event is called the *chait katai* or the spring harvest. In the plains, it is common to see Gonds working as landless labourers. Over the centuries, the tribals have been dispossessed of their lands by moneylenders and liquor sellers in the course of settlement of their debts. Over time their lands have passed into the hands of settlers from the fertile river valley plains who have migrated in search of new lands for cultivation.

Table 2 : Occupation pattern of Gonds

		Total workers	Cultivators	Agricultural Labourers	Agri- allied
MP	Rural	48.39	32.22	13.55	4.94
	Urban	36.98	3.79	6.89	1.15
Betul	Rural	52.30	29.07	19.64	1.75
	Urban	37.53	2.12	5.51	2.46
Hoshangabad	Rural	81.40	13.51	24.18	1.87
	Urban	35.60	1.03	6.30	2.26
Chhindwara	Rural	47.94	28.08	17.05	0.74
	Urban	30.39	2.12	7.15	0.72

(Source: Primary Census Abstract, Census of India, 1991)

The Gonds are a simple tribe whose basic needs are minimal. Their lifestyle is amply represented in their dwellings, which are simple structures with the interior comprising of two rooms separated by a row of tall baskets, in which they store grain. Adjoining the house is the cattle shed; both are enclosed with a bamboo fence for protection from wild animals.

Of the various tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, the Gonds are among the more educated, but, still their literacy level is very low

compared to that of other communities. The literacy rate among women is even lower.

Over the years the Gonds, have begun to mix with non-tribals. Unfortunately their mainstreaming has been at the cost of losing their language, culture, values and worldview.

Table 3 : Literacy rates among Gonds

	Total			Rural			Urban		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
MP	21.54	32.16	10.73	20.33	30.8	9.74	44.68	56.82	30.96
Betul	17.21	26.04	8.35	16.27	25.06	3.53	45.32	54.68	34.62
Hoshangabad	20.63	30.44	10.03	17.89	27.36	7.73	54.88	67.2	40.29
Chhindwara	23.62	31.51	15.71	21.85	29.46	14.26	50.17	61.29	38.3

(Source: Primary Census Abstract, Census of India, 1991)

Increasingly, a ‘Hindu’ view has begun to prevail among the Gonds. This started with the establishment of the Gond kingdoms and the marriage of the ruling class (the Raj Gonds) with the Hindu rulers of the time. Until the Mughal period, the Gonds rarely figured in contemporary chronicles and therefore little accurate information exists on the early Gonds. But the ruins of the forts ascribed to the Gond rajas, who founded large kingdoms in the 13th and 14th centuries, suggest relations with other populations whose style of living the rulers imitated. By this time, the Gonds were settled farmers who cultivated their land with ploughs and bullocks. Land was plentiful and the people moved freely from one settlement to the other.¹ This mobility has now ended and with this, the life style of the Gonds has totally changed.

The Gonds speak Gondi, a Dravidian language of the same family as Tamil, Kannada and Telugu. This has led many sociologists to believe

¹ Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival - Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1985, Oxford University Press, Delhi

that the Gonds may have come from the south into the Central Provinces. The language of the Gonds has undergone tremendous change over the centuries. In the Satpura plateau namely, Betul, Hoshangabad, Chhindwara, Mandla and other districts, they have adopted the local dialect of Hindi. In Bastar, now in Chhattisgarh, the tribes speak an amalgamated version of the original language depending upon their geographic location. In areas bordering Andhra Pradesh they speak a mixture of Gondi and Telugu while in areas bordering Maharashtra a mixture of Gondi and Marathi is spoken.

The cultural transformation of this tribe is best illustrated in the obvious 'Hinduisation' of their original mythical legends of their origin, claiming Shiva to be their chief god. Further evidence of this is seen in the case of some Septs who due to probably having forgotten their original Sept name have some other object of veneration.



Gond society exhibits a social structure based on occupation. There are several occupational castes such as the Agarias or ironworkers, the Ojhas or soothsayers, Pardhans or priests and minstrels, Solahas or carpenters, and Koilabhutis or dancers or prostitutes. Categories other than these are based on mixed descent like the Gond Gowaris, Bhatras and Jhadi Telengas who have descended from Gonds and Hindus while the Baigas, Bhujias and Khairwars descend from an alliance between the Gonds and other non-Aryan tribes.