
CRAFTING IDENTITY: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF LEATHERWORKING COMMUNITIES IN GONDIA DISTRICT, MAHARASHTRA

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Abstract :

This study examines the socio-cultural dynamics of the leatherworking community in Maharashtra's Gondia district. Historically linked to marginalized caste groups, especially Dalits, leatherwork has functioned not only as a livelihood but also as a symbol of cultural identity, social stratification, and resilience. Using a qualitative methodology—comprising interviews, fieldwork, and analysis of secondary sources—the research explores the community's historical significance, present socio-economic realities, gender dynamics, aspirations of the younger generation, and the impact of modernization and social stigma. The study reveals a community in flux, balancing its traditional roots with contemporary changes in a transforming rural landscape.

Keywords: Leatherworking, Gondia, Dalit artisans, socio-cultural identity, caste and occupation, rural Maharashtra

Introduction :

Guru Ravidas (1450–1520) was a key figure in the Bhakti movement, revered as a saint, poet, and social reformer who opposed caste-based inequality and advocated for spiritual unity, devotion to a formless divine, and social justice. Born into a Chamar (leatherworking) family, his life and teachings hold deep significance for the Chambhar Samaja community traditionally engaged in leatherwork and commonly found in Maharashtra. The Chambhar community, with its roots in leather craftsmanship, is also present in various other Indian states, including Karnataka, Goa, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and West Bengal. Historically, this occupation placed them outside the conventional varna system, leading to systemic exclusion and stigmatization under the practice of untouchability. Leatherwork, though essential and skill-intensive, has been socially marginalized due to its association with impurity and manual labor. In Maharashtra's Gondia district, this craft continues to be practiced mainly by Dalit groups (Walde, Nikhil, 2016), particularly those from the Chamar caste. This research aims to explore how members of the leatherworking community in this region preserve their cultural identity, respond to the constraints of caste-based discrimination, and

navigate evolving socio-economic realities in a modernizing rural context (Dr. P. S. Changole,2019).

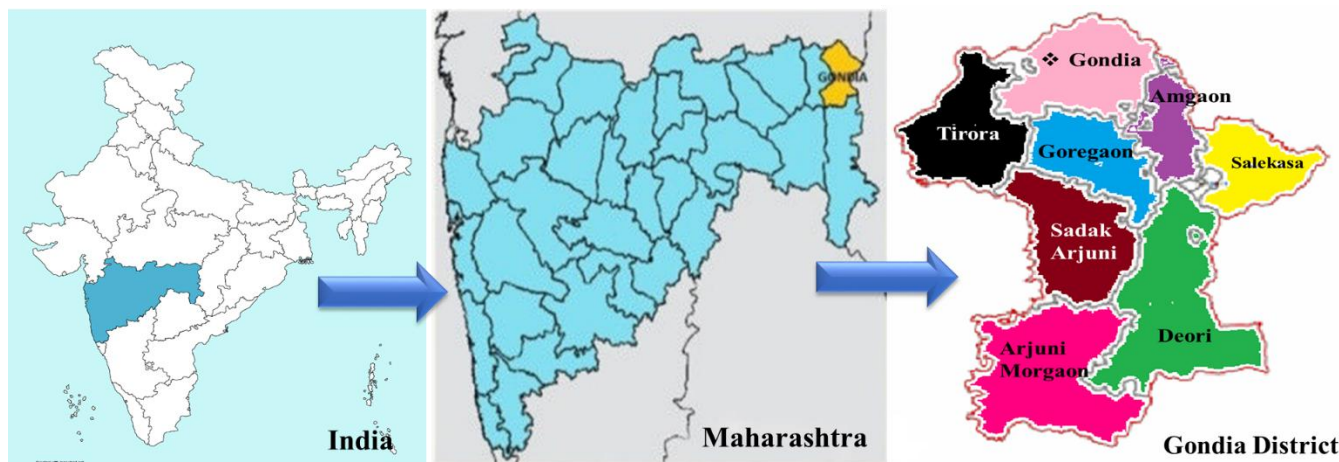


Fig.1. Geographical map of Gondia district

Deori	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Lohara •Hardoli
Gorgoan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Bhadanga •Goregaon
Aamgaon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Kumbhartoli •Bangaon
Gondia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Nagpura Murri •Aasoli
Tirora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Sant Ravidas Nagar •Wadegaon
Salekasa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tirkhedi

Fig. 2. The Most Density Chambhar Community in the Gondia district by village-wise

Methodology :

1. Semi-structured interviews with 25 leather artisans across eleven villages in Gondia :

The analysis of collected data highlights key demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the Chamar community in the Gondia district (Census 2011-2021-2025). A significant portion of the respondents (41%) fall within the 30 to 42 age group, with males comprising 35.75% and females 12%, indicating a higher male participation rate. The majority of respondents (560) speak Marathi, while a smaller number use Hindi (260), and only 1.5% are English speakers. Marital status data shows that 80% of the respondents are married, among whom 80% have children, though 53% report not having children, reflecting some inconsistencies that warrant further investigation. Only 0.7% of families have more than four

children. Access to professional and higher education is extremely limited in the community, and the pace of social transformation remains slow.

2. Participant observation during craft-making and community events :

Participant observation is a valuable ethnographic method used to gain an in-depth understanding of a community's cultural practices by engaging directly with their daily life and rituals (Atkinson, P., 2022). For the **Chamar community**, particularly in regions like **Gondia district**, this approach can provide rich insights into traditional occupations, social organization, and cultural identity (Jaimangal-Jones, D. ,2014). Below is a framework for conducting participant observation during **craft-making** and **community events** among the Chamar community.



Fig.3. Craft-making process

3. Analysis of secondary data including census reports and NGO records :

An analysis of secondary data, including government census reports and records from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), provides valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions of the Chambhar community in the Gondia district. Census data reveals that the Chambhar population is widely distributed across several tehsils, with a relatively balanced gender ratio. However, literacy rates and educational attainment levels among the community remain significantly lower compared to district averages (Deoman,2017). NGO reports further highlight that a large proportion of the community is engaged in traditional leatherwork and daily wage labor, with limited access to stable employment and financial support. Documentation also points to a low level of awareness and participation in government welfare schemes, despite their availability (Umbarkar, D. S. 2016). Factors such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and social stigma associated with caste identity continue to hinder their progress. Overall, the secondary data corroborates primary findings, emphasizing the need for focused educational, economic, and social interventions to uplift the Chambhar community in the region (Shah, G.,2001). Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on age, gender, and role within the craft.

Findings and Analysis :

1. **Language and Communication.** Languages Spoken: The Chamar community in Gondia primarily speaks Marathi, the official language of Maharashtra. Some may also use Hindi or Gondi, especially in tribal-influenced areas. Oral Traditions, folk tales, proverbs, and songs play a role in transmitting cultural values and historical narratives.
2. **Cultural Practices** The community maintains distinct rituals linked to Ambedkarite Buddhism and celebrates traditional festivals with a focus on equality and cultural pride (Michael, S. M. 2007).
3. **Economic Conditions.** Historically, the Chamar community has been associated with leather work, such as shoemaking and tanning. However, in rural areas like Gondia, many Chamars have transitioned to agricultural labor and daily-wage work due to limited opportunities in traditional crafts. This shift often results in low and unstable incomes, contributing to persistent poverty and limited upward mobility (Kumar, Santosh, 2023).
4. **Education and Aspirations** Younger generations are increasingly educated and seeking alternative employment, often distancing themselves from the leather trade. However, some youth advocate for cultural revival through social media and design innovation. Despite some children (20.5%) being admitted to hostels and the availability of government welfare schemes post-constitutional amendments, poverty continues to be a significant barrier to educational attainment (Naik, A. K., & Tagade, N. 2018). The proportion of families receiving educational loans is very low, indicating financial constraints and systemic inaccessibility. Furthermore, the lack of strong community leadership has contributed to a widespread unawareness of the importance and opportunities of higher education. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted policy interventions and community-driven initiatives to promote educational access and socio-economic upliftment within the Chamar community (Bhoi, D., & Lakra, N. R. 2022).

Discussion:

The leatherworking community in Gondia exemplifies a complex interplay of resilience and marginalization. While caste stigma persists, there is a growing assertion of identity and efforts at socio-economic mobility. The craft is at a crossroads—facing extinction or revival through adaptive strategies and cultural reclamation.

Conclusion :

This study reveals the multi-layered identity of Gondia's leatherworker craftspeople, cultural custodians, and social reformers. Policy support, inclusive markets, and awareness can help preserve their heritage while enhancing livelihoods. Future research should explore comparative studies across districts and examine the impact of digital platforms on artisan communities.

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