A photograph of a herd of sheep in a grassy field. In the foreground, a white sheep with black markings on its face and legs stands on the left. To its right, a dark brown sheep is grazing. Further right, a light brown sheep stands facing the camera. The background shows a large herd of sheep of various colors (white, black, brown) scattered across a green field. In the distance, there is a low, flat-topped hill under a cloudy sky.

Visual ethnography On Shepherds (Dhangar) of Aarewadi

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God Biroba from village Astha in Sangli district



Abstract

The village Aarewadi is famous for the temple of Biroba. Biroba, being the patron deity of the *Dhangar* caste, Aarewadi is primarily a *Dhangar* village. It is said that Biroba himself shepherded his sheep in the forests here, and ever since the *Dhangars* settled here to serve him. Since I am a *Dhangar* myself, I visit this place once a year since I was a kid, to pay my respects to our family deity. Over the years I have observed that the pilgrims who come here and the locals, both are distinct from anything I have seen. One might say that their living is simple but there is something inherently special about them. They have preserved their way of life even today. Their faith towards their god and the way in which they worship is truly beautiful. They arouse my curiosity. For my ethnography project, I could not have found a subject more interesting and closer to my heart than the *Dhangars* of Aarewadi. Through an ethnographic study of their lives, homes, attire etc. I realize how they define their identity. Their overall way of life has been photo documented as a part of this project.





Introduction

India is a land of diversity. Dispersed across the landscape are people of various castes and communities. Maharashtra is itself home to a number of such communities, each having its own traditions and customs. One such community is that of the *Dhangars*. The *Dhangars* have been blessed with an age-long tradition and a beautiful culture. Hesse *Dhangars* are generally dispersed all across India, in Maharashtra they have settled in villages in the western parts. Aarewadi is one such village. The village is home only to Kolekar families who have migrated from Karnataka to serve Biroba, their deity.

These folks have fiercely preserved their culture. Their beliefs, customs are all just the way they were centuries ago. The only change is that of occupation. Very few of them are actually shepherds today.

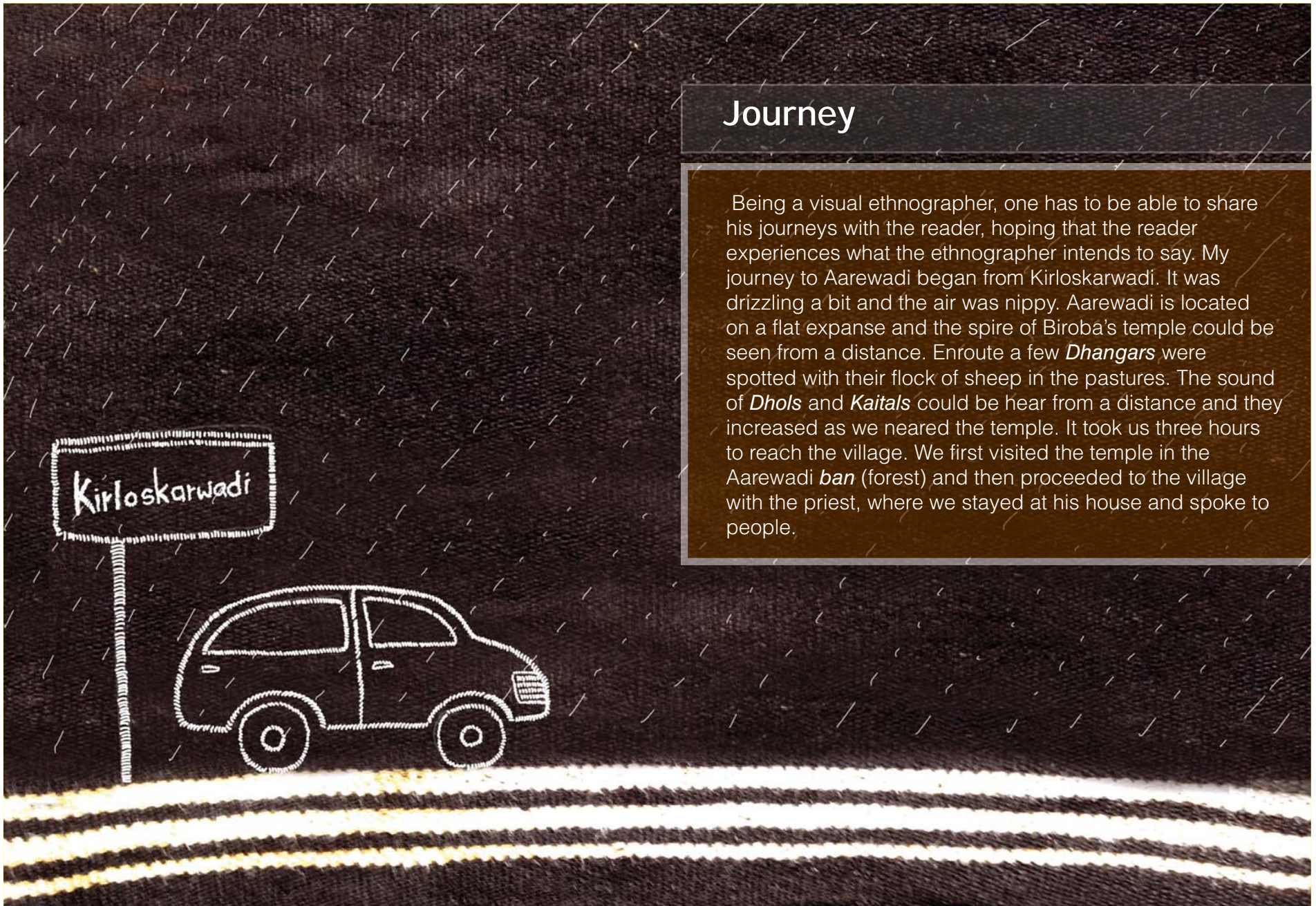
For the project, my journey started from my original village of Kirloskarwadi, about sixty kms from Aarewadi.

I was accompanied by my mother as she knew the area well. As soon as we reached Aarewadi, we proceeded to the temple hoping to meet and speak to people. Our family priest

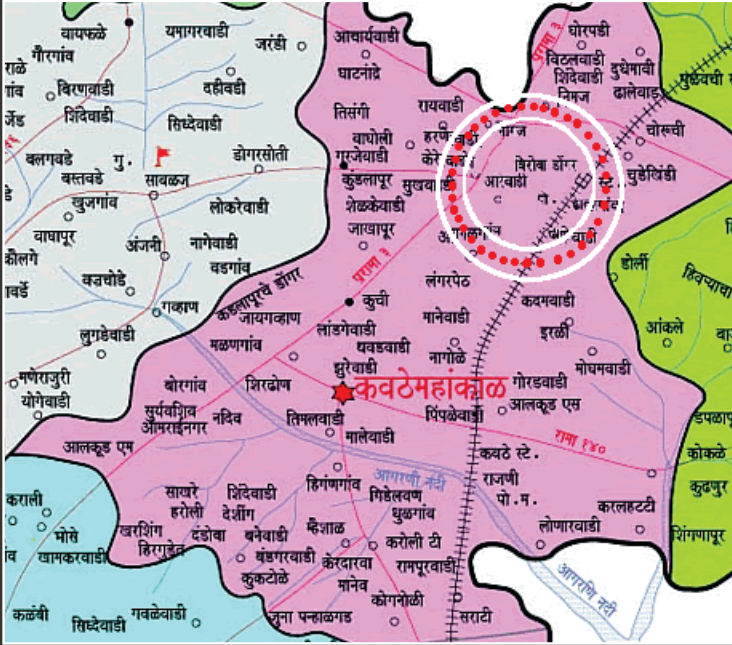
had made arrangements for our stay and food. He heard the project and readily agreed to help me. He guided me to various parts of the village. He took me to the houses of the quilt weavers, of the owners of old jewellery. He spoke of ancient gods, of rituals and traditions. The purpose of the project was to document this unique lifestyle of the *Dhangars*, their special jewellery, their rustic houses, their rugged quilts. Even as I roamed about gathering information, they looked amused at what I was upto. They are inherently shy and sincere but endearing folks. They welcomed us with great warmth. I observed their lives closely and it has been a rewarding experience.

Journey

Being a visual ethnographer, one has to be able to share his journeys with the reader, hoping that the reader experiences what the ethnographer intends to say. My journey to Aarewadi began from Kirloskarwadi. It was drizzling a bit and the air was nippy. Aarewadi is located on a flat expanse and the spire of Biroba's temple could be seen from a distance. Enroute a few *Dhangars* were spotted with their flock of sheep in the pastures. The sound of *Dhols* and *Kaitals* could be heard from a distance and they increased as we neared the temple. It took us three hours to reach the village. We first visited the temple in the Aarewadi *ban* (forest) and then proceeded to the village with the priest, where we stayed at his house and spoke to people.

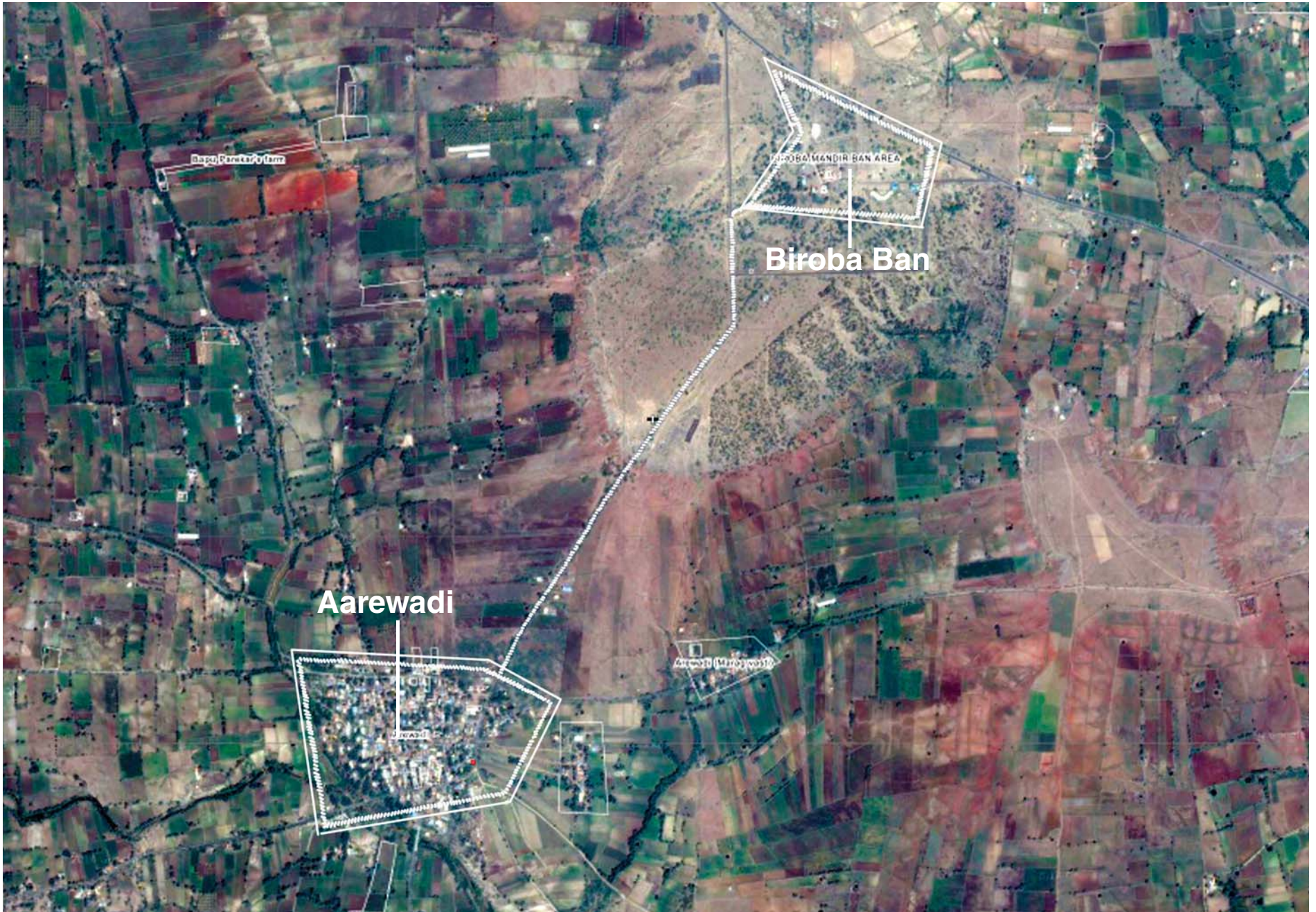


India



Geographic location

Aarewadi is located in Kavthe mahakal taluka of the Sangli district in Maharashtra.



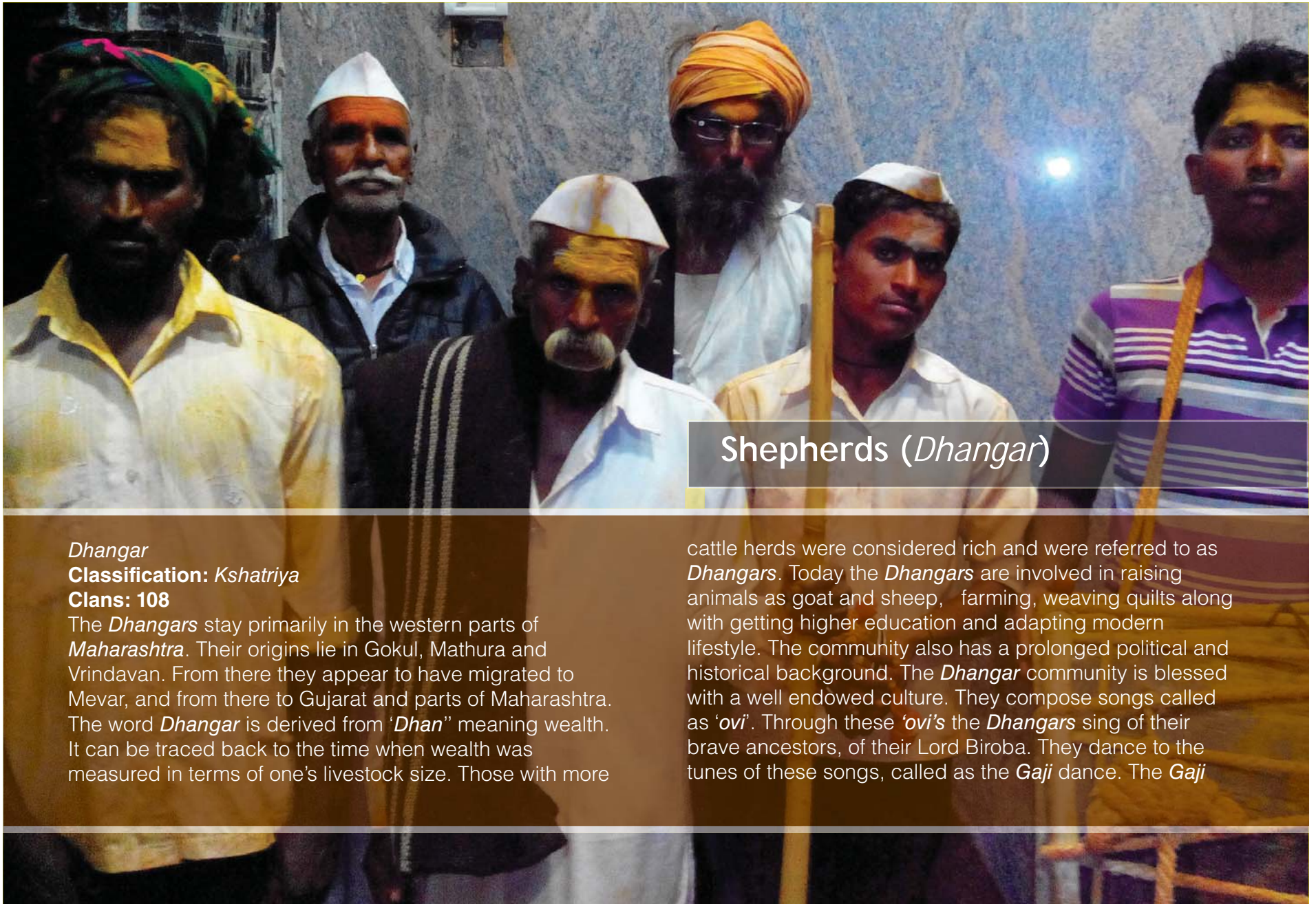




Aarewadi

Aarewadi is located in Kavthe mahakal taluka of the Sangli district in Maharashtra. The village consists of two parts viz The Biroba's forest where the main temple is and the residential village about half a kilometre away. The village is full of Kolekar families belonging to *Dhangar* community. Many of them are involved in farming in the nearby areas. Some still herd sheep and other livestock. The houses are old and built of stone masonry. There is a school and a gram panchayat too along with a few shops. The old people say that Shivaji himself handed the lordship of land (*patil*) to the *Dhangar* folk. Biroba himself being here, the *Dhangars* found more reasons to reside here. The god's gathering happens twice a year, called a *jatra*, as Biroba is our family god I have attended *jatra* so many times. *Dhangar* folks from as far as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka gather here thus making it a huge congregation.





Shepherds (*Dhangar*)

Dhangar

Classification: *Kshatriya*

Clans: 108

The *Dhangars* stay primarily in the western parts of *Maharashtra*. Their origins lie in Gokul, Mathura and Vrindavan. From there they appear to have migrated to Mevar, and from there to Gujarat and parts of Maharashtra. The word *Dhangar* is derived from '*Dhan*' meaning wealth. It can be traced back to the time when wealth was measured in terms of one's livestock size. Those with more

cattle herds were considered rich and were referred to as *Dhangars*. Today the *Dhangars* are involved in raising animals as goat and sheep, farming, weaving quilts along with getting higher education and adapting modern lifestyle. The community also has a prolonged political and historical background. The *Dhangar* community is blessed with a well endowed culture. They compose songs called as '*ovi*'. Through these '*ovi*'s the *Dhangars* sing of their brave ancestors, of their Lord Biroba. They dance to the tunes of these songs, called as the *Gaji* dance. The *Gaji*



dance is carried out with the whole *Dhangar* paraphernalia, in the company of *Dhols* and by throwing *Bhandara*, the holy powder into the skies.

The *Dhangars* of Maharashtra wear a typical costume.

The forehead are smeared with the *Bhandara*. A sleeveless '*Bundy*' on the torso. A loin called the *Dhoti*. A quilt across the shoulders and a turban, *Mundasa*, on the head.

A silver '*Tod*', a '*Kada*' in the hand, earrings and an image of the god in the neck, the *Taak*. The ladies wear a nine yard Irakli saree, in the traditional *Kashtha* style.

Their foreheads have the mark of marriage, a *Kunku*. They hold the saree across the head, the *padar*, a '*Maaspatta*' across the waist, and '*zube*' earrings in the ears. They wear *Masolya Jodvya*, fish like rings on the toes. A *Saaj* in the neck and a *Nuth* in the nose, such adorned are the *Dhangar* ladies.

In the pantheon of *Dhangar* gods are Biroba, Khandoba, Siddhoba, Dhuloba, Suryaba, Jotiba, Mhasoba, Nagoba, Mayappa, and female deities as Tulja Bhavani, Mayakka, Yelumma, Choundai, Yamai, Banai. Khandoba is the prime deity among them. They also worship their ancestors as brave spirits as *Veer*.











Attire

The *Dhangars* of Aarewadi are slowly stepping into the modern world. However, they have striven to preserve their culture. They still lead a fairly primitive lifestyle. The old folks in Aarewadi still dress traditionally. The women especially dress and wear jewellery as in the olden days. All this has always fascinated me. To see such antique jewellery is a rarity in today's world. Such way of life, now fast disappearing, is preserved with great affection in Aarewadi.



Male attire

As mentioned earlier, Aarewadi is progressing slowly but surely. Accordingly, the younger generation wears pants and shirts. The older males still wear a loin, '*dhoti*', a loose cotton vest, '*sudrah*', a huge turban, '*mundasa*', a quilt on the shoulder and the *Bhandara* smeared across the forehead with Kolhapuri leather chappals, such is the quaint attire of a typical *Dhangar*.











Female attire

Dhangan women wear the traditional nine yard Irakali saree, in the '*Kaashta*' style. The Irakali saree is woven in Irakal in Karnataka. It's speciality is the golden red '*resham*' border that is common across all sarees with a variety of intricate embroidered patterns. The '*choli*' is made from a special patterned cloth called the '*khan*', and it is stamped with motifs inspired from natural elements as corns from the

field, sun, flowers, leaves, etc. some women drape it in a circular fashion, keeping the head always covered. They dress predominantly in bright colors as green, red, blue, occasionally a dark color too. They also wear a waistband, '*kamar-band*', often made of silver. In all, the *Dhangers* dress quite attractively.



स्पेशल नं. १



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वेकूसा परशुरामसा सिंगरी ऑन्ड सन्

हातमागाकर तयार झालेले सुती, रेशमी, बरी व चमक ग्वान्ती डलकल्ल

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लुगडीयांचे कारखानदार

हनमसागर

(जि. कोप्पळ)



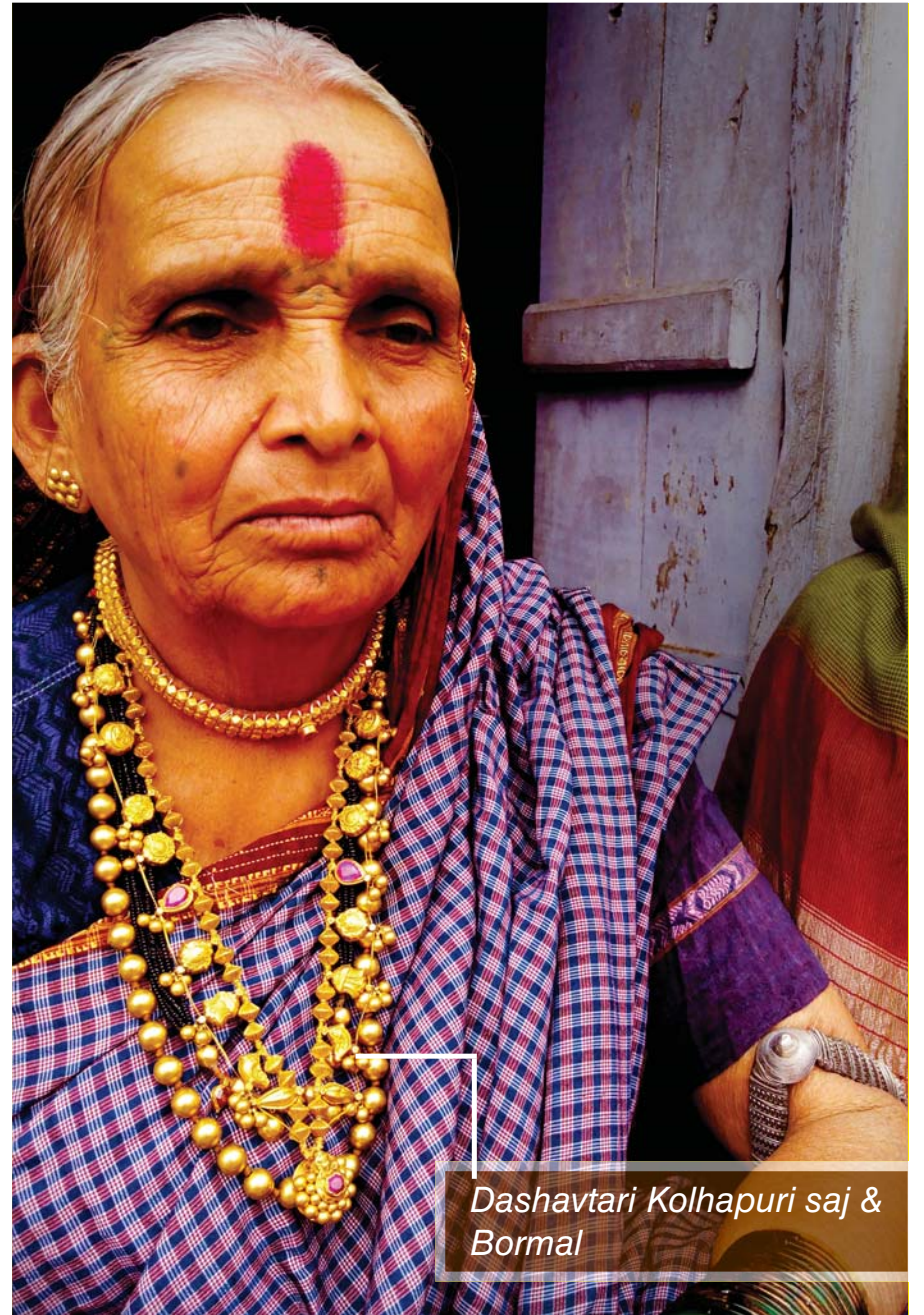


Ornaments

Ornaments form an indivisible part of the *Dhangar* lifestyle. The males might not use them today much, but traditionally both the genders wear gold and silver ornaments. From the ears to the tip of the toe, they adorn themselves with big and small ornaments. The female ornaments are especially heavy and use gold and pearls to a large extent. The ear is decked from the top of the lobe to the bottom, all along the curve. '*Zube*' is a typical such ornament pierced in the bottom ear with umbrella like crown from which floral embellishments are hung. Upwards, a very tiny ornament called '*Mukut*' is worn. On the upper ear, the '*Bugdi*' is worn. It is pierced at multiple points to allow a number of smaller ornaments to be worn. A '*Nuth*' is a typical nose ring that is nowadays worn only on special occasions. A '*Vajratick*' adorns the neck. It is a heavy ornament made from gold beads. A variation of this is the '*Belpaanachi Vajratick*', in

which the gold disks are shaped like the Bel leaves and placed on a cloth band. . A necklace of black beads, '*Dorla*', is worn by married women. It is a very prominent symbol of marriage and married life. Another necklace called '*Putlyanchi maal*' is a series of gold disks strung together. The biggest ornament is the '*Kolhapuri Saaj*' in which all the ten incarnations of Vishnu are embossed in gold medallion and strung in a gold necklace. Green glass bangles called the '*Hirva chuda*', '*Bindlya*', wrist bands like '*Tode*' and '*Paatile*' adorn the hands. The upper arms have the '*Tolband*' and '*Vakya*', both castes in silver. The waistband called a '*Maaspatta*' is also made from silver. Rings called '*Jodvya*' are worn in the toe besides the thumb. On the fourth toe, there are silver toe rings called '*Maasolya*' in the shape of fishes. Both of these are also symbols of marriage. These ornaments reflect just how prosperous and rich the *Dhangar* traditions are.





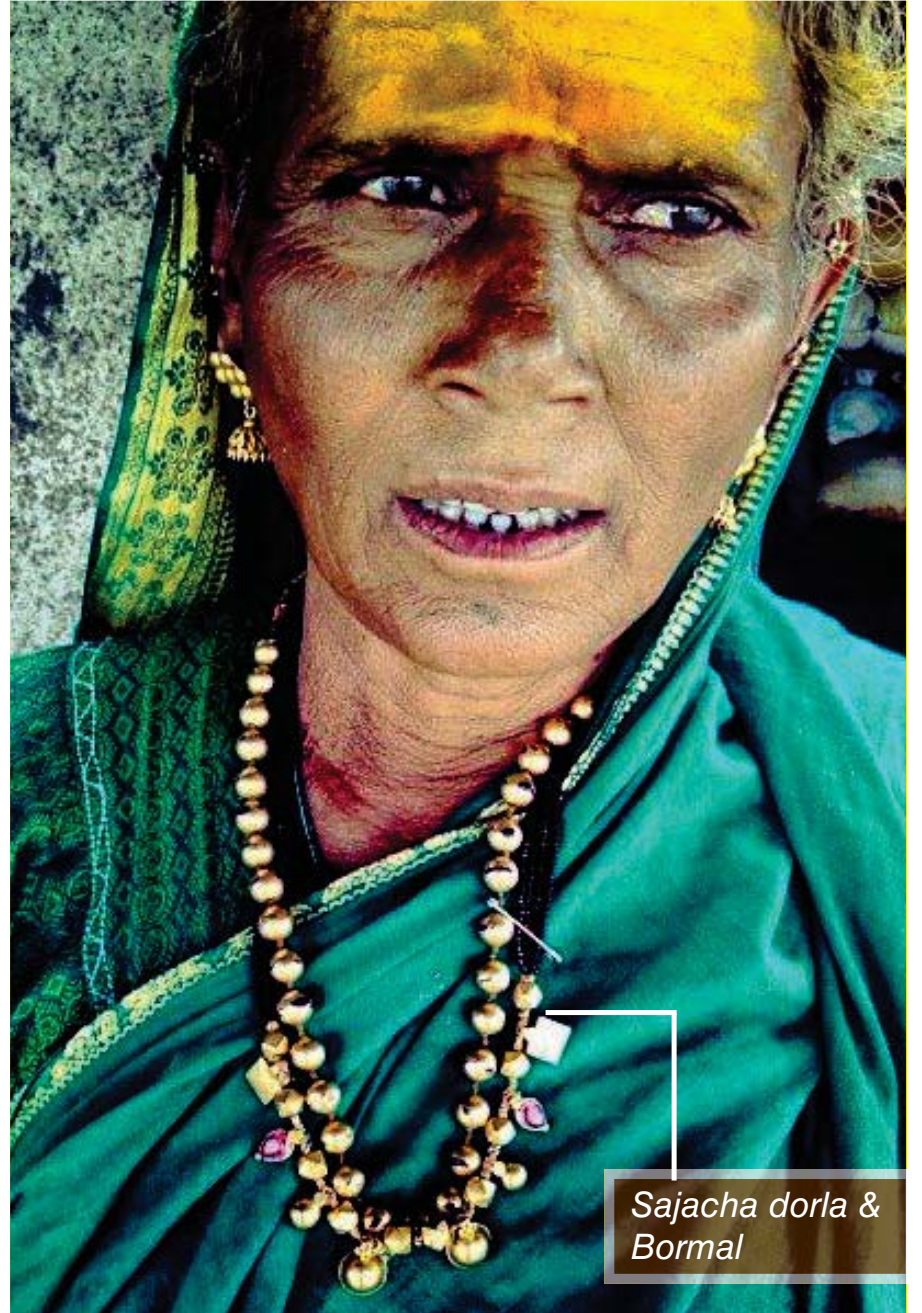
Dashavtari Kolhapuri saj & Bormal



Maspatta



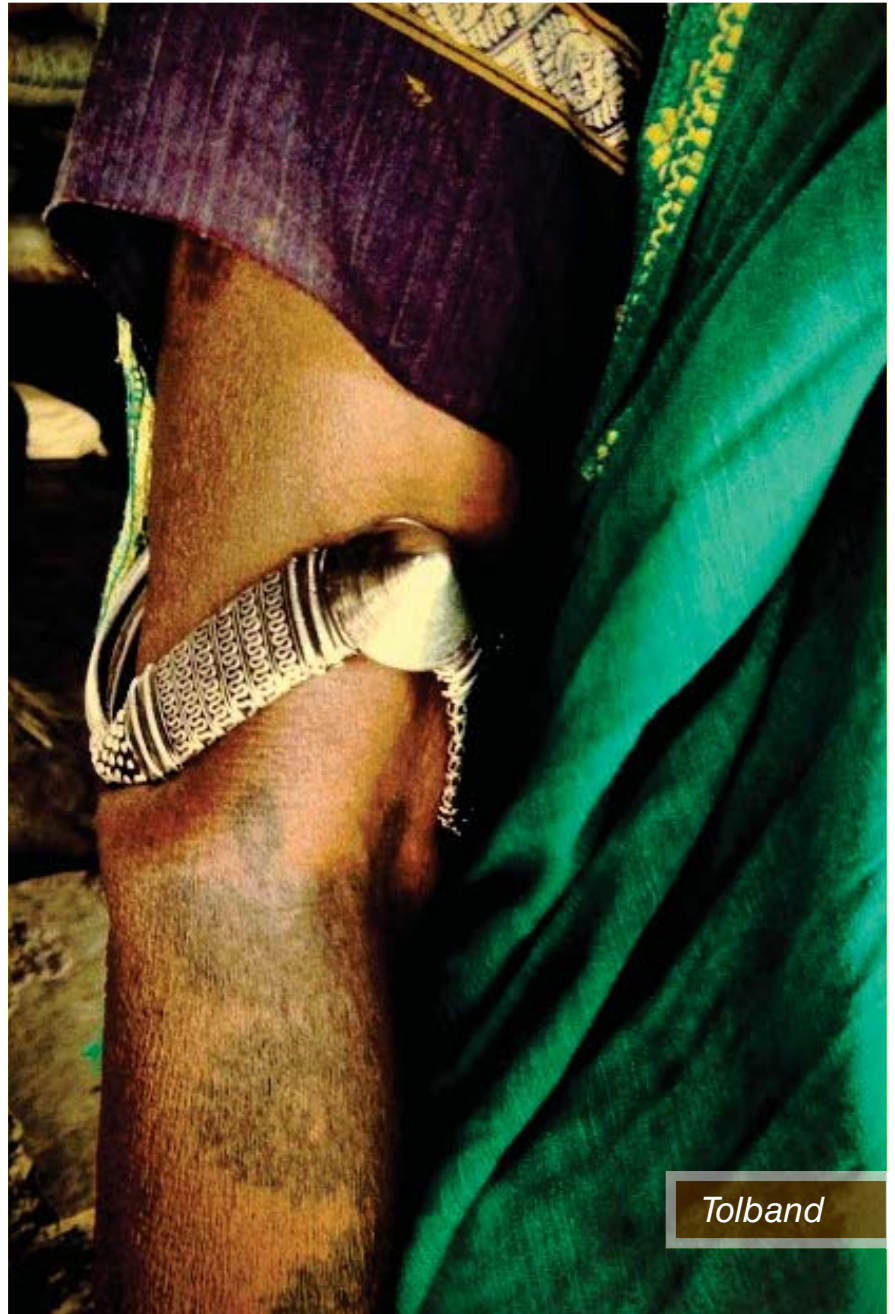
Belpani vajratik



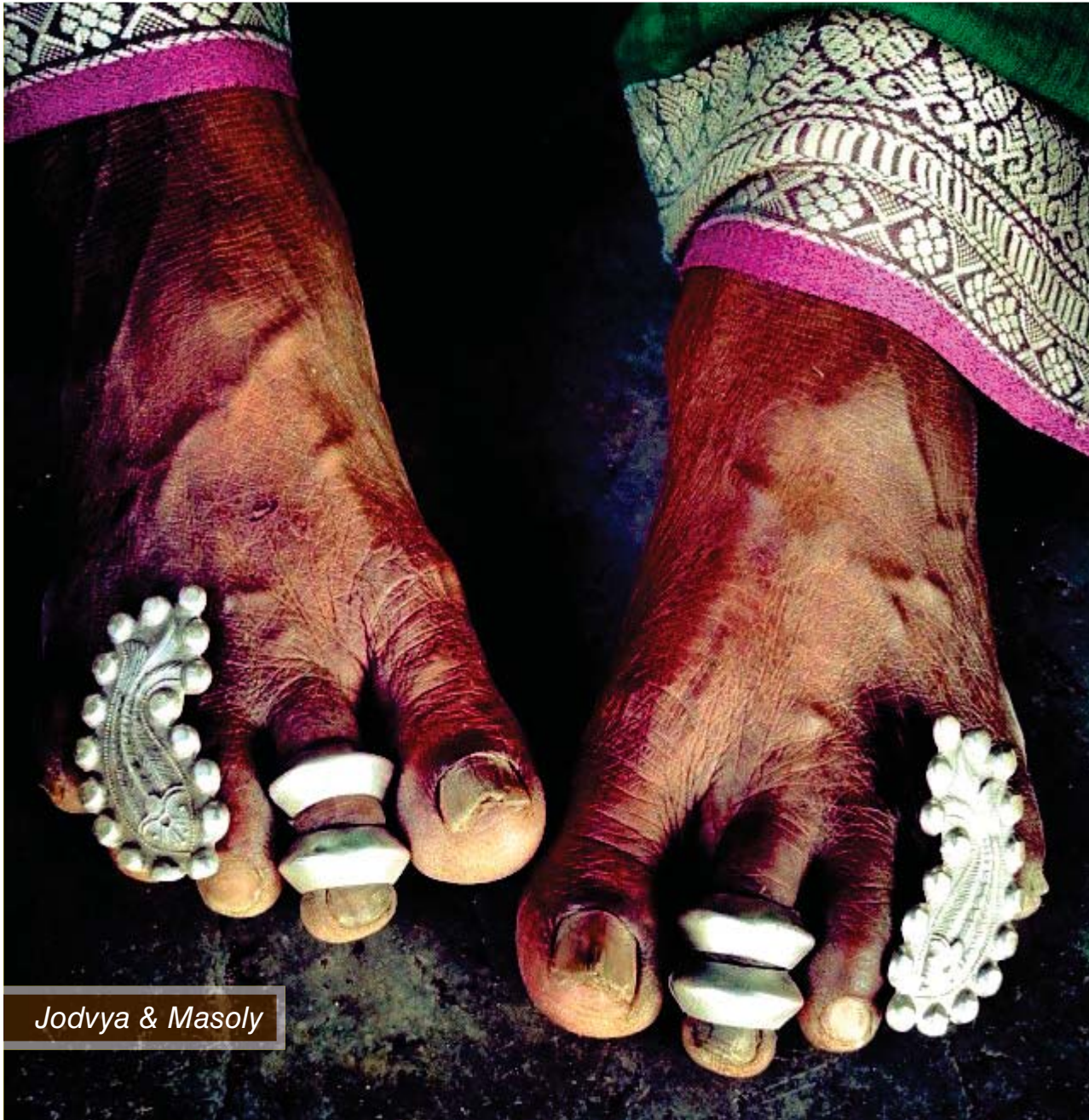
Sajacha dorla & Bormal



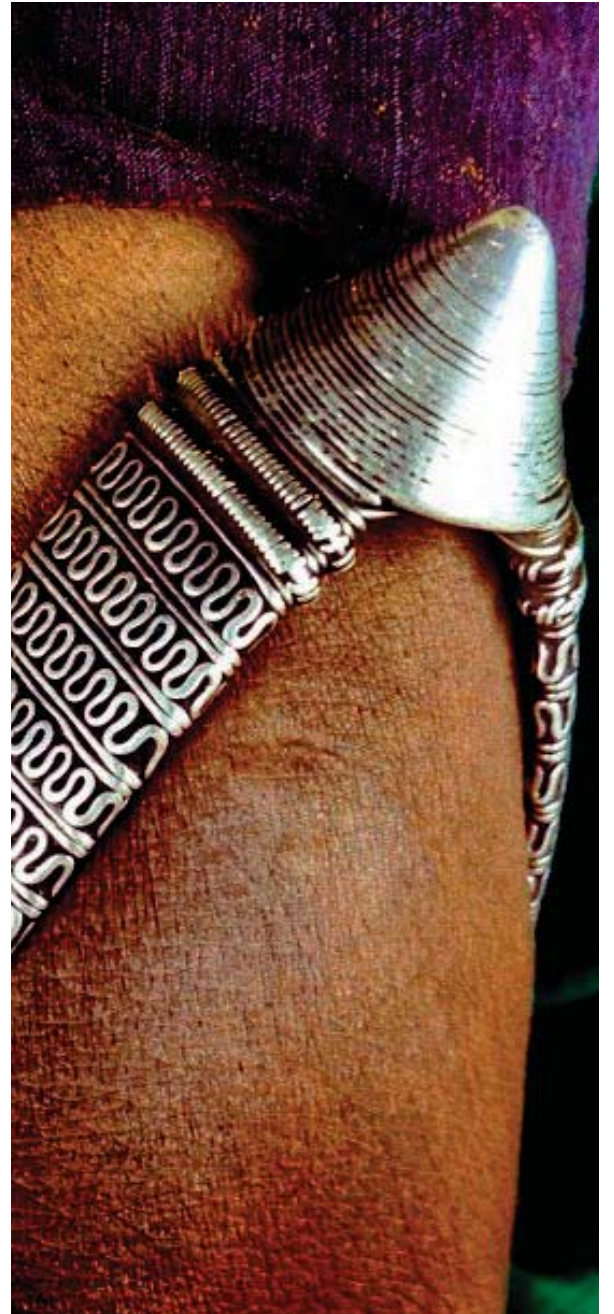
Toda

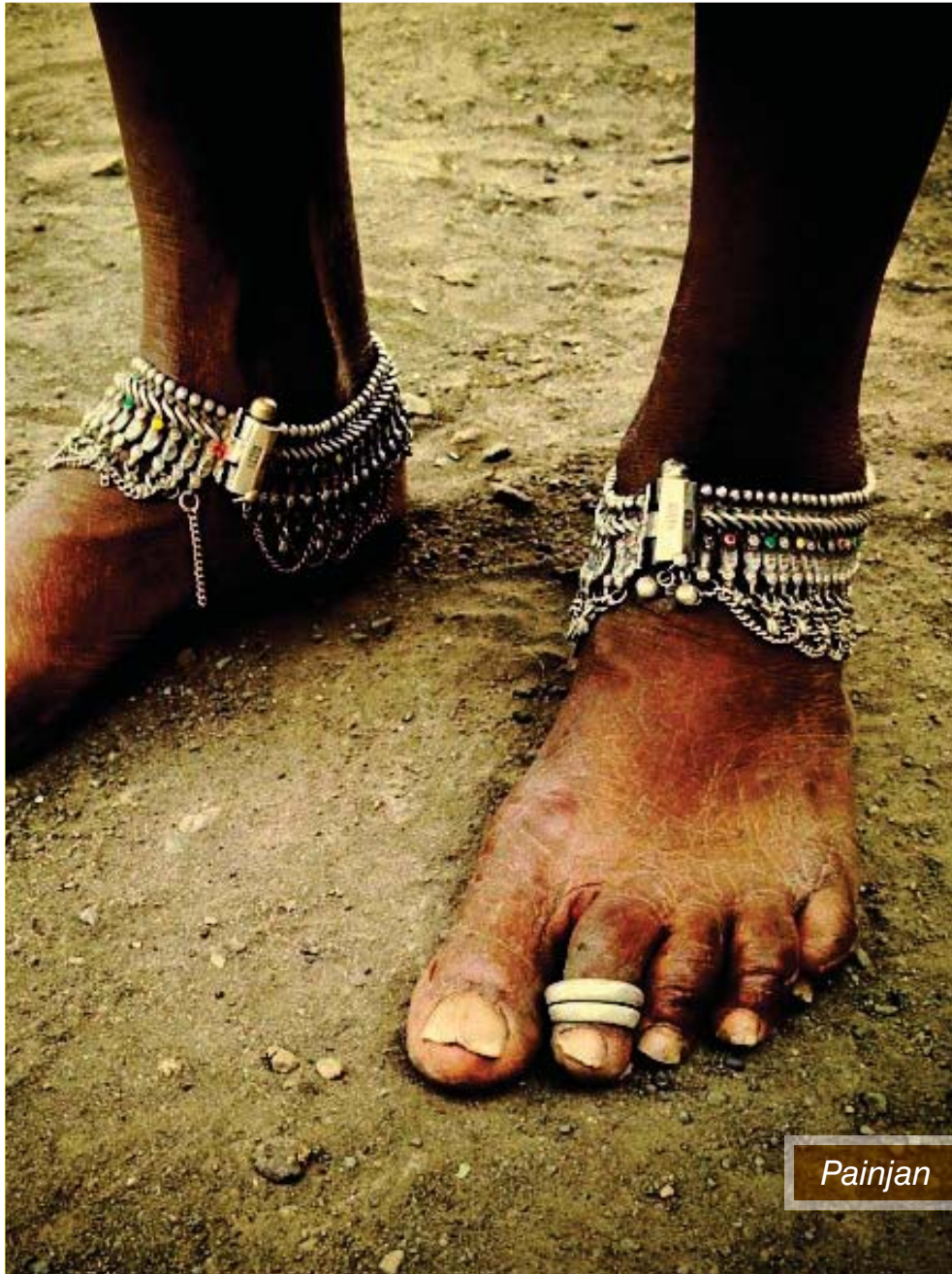


Tolband



Jodvya & Masoly





Painjan



Toda



Putlyanchi Maal



Belpani Vajratik



Ornaments making

The *Dhangar* make their ornaments from artisans in a neighbouring village. During my stay at Aarewadi, I had a chance to go there and get a glimpse of how this tradition is casted. Most of the ornaments that were being worked upon were in silver.







Lasni tode





Moulds of jewellery



Tattoos

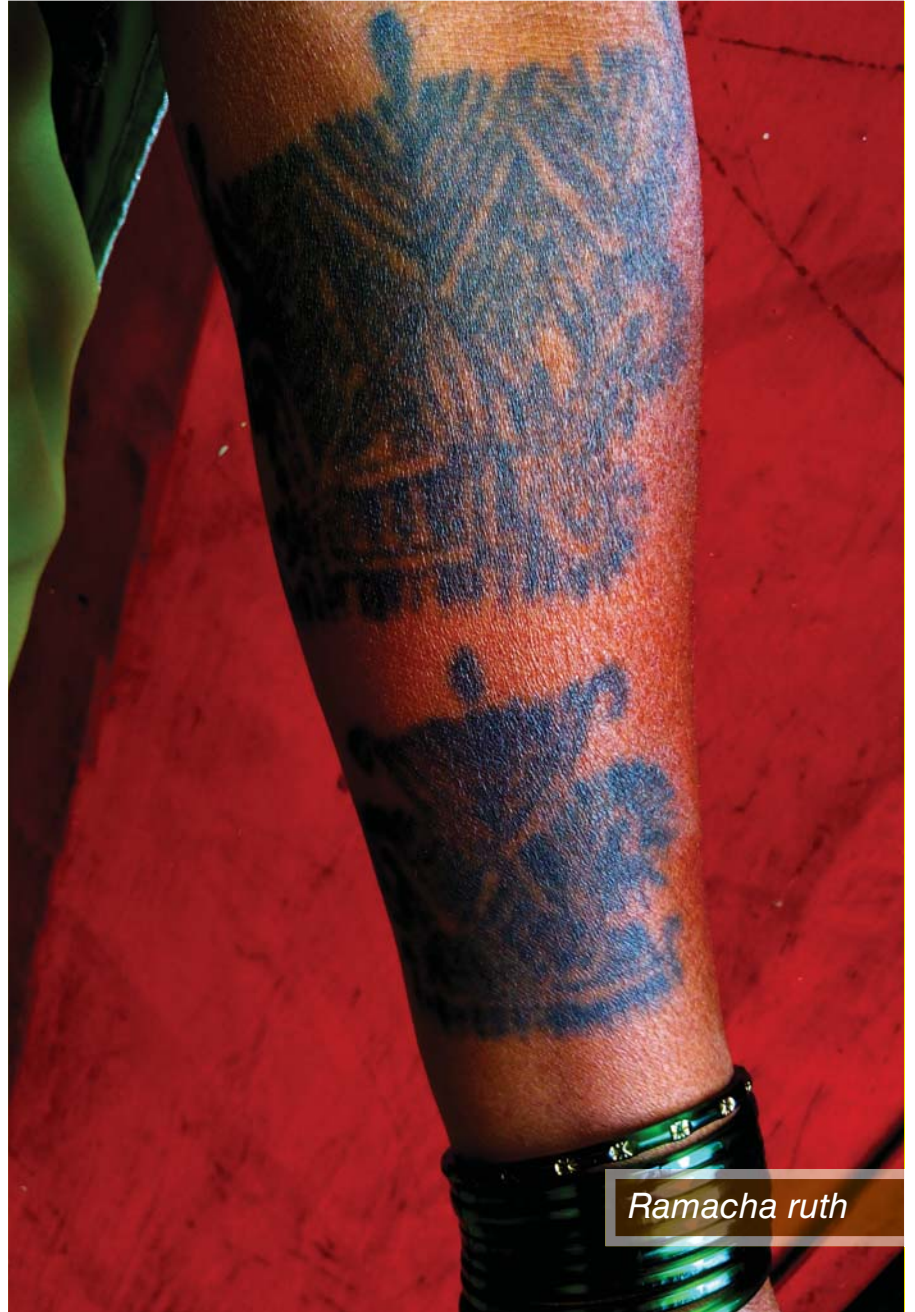
The *Dhangar* women have a tendency to deck themselves up in various ways. They also get themselves tattooed as a part of this tendency. Though it is on the decline nowadays, the older women have tattoos on parts as hands, chin, besides the eye, forehead and the location of each tattoo signifies different meaning. This tattoo process is traditional and so are the patterns. Mainly, the women get a sun and a moon tattooed on the forehead. On the hand, they might have the bowstring of lord Rama, his cradle, his chariot, the *Tulsi Vrindavan*, a cobra, a sunflower and so on. Earlier it was considered that women with more tattoos were more tough. The practice and the subsequent belief is now waning.



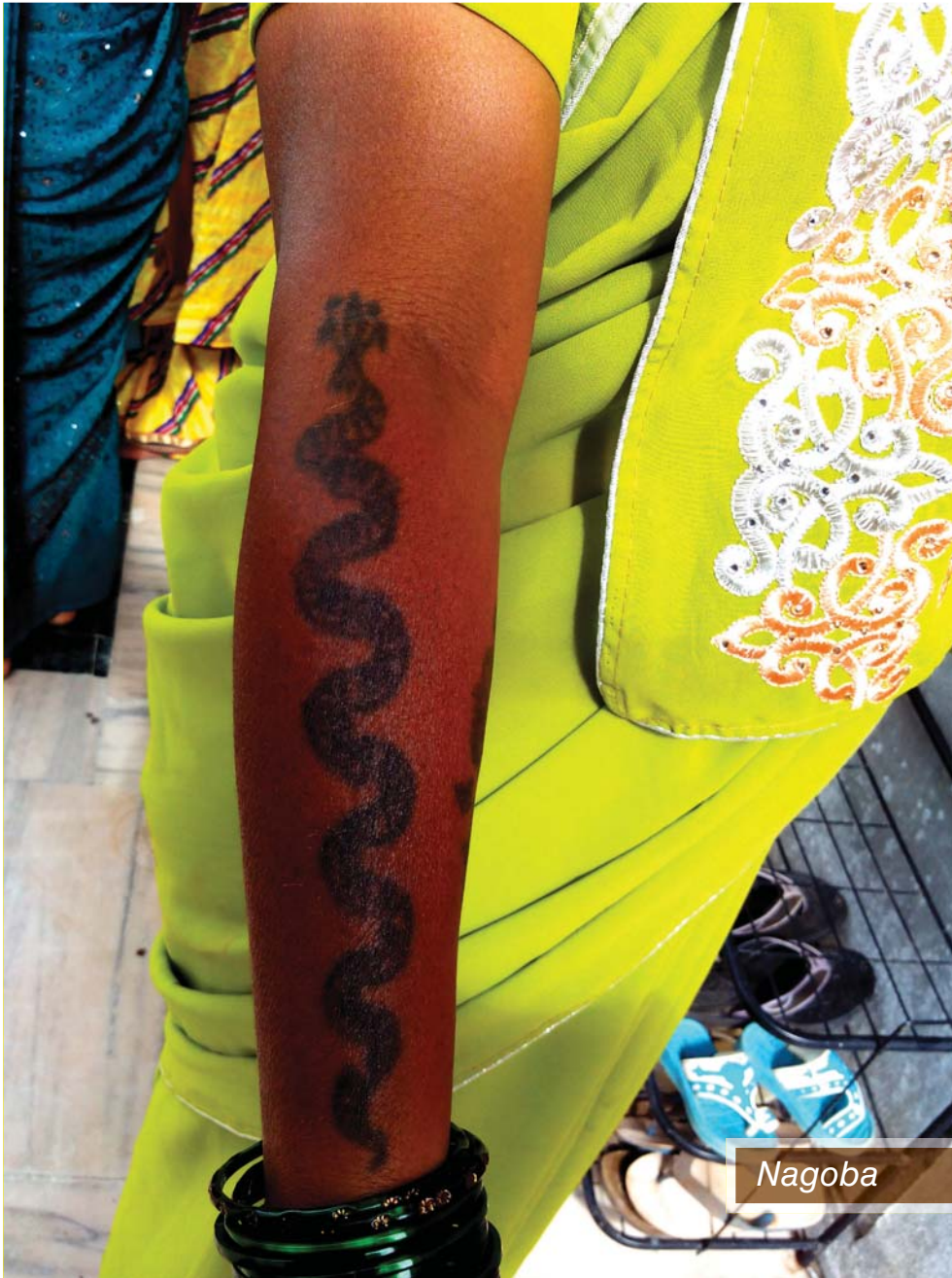
Suryaful



Ramache Bashing



Ramacha ruth



Nagoba









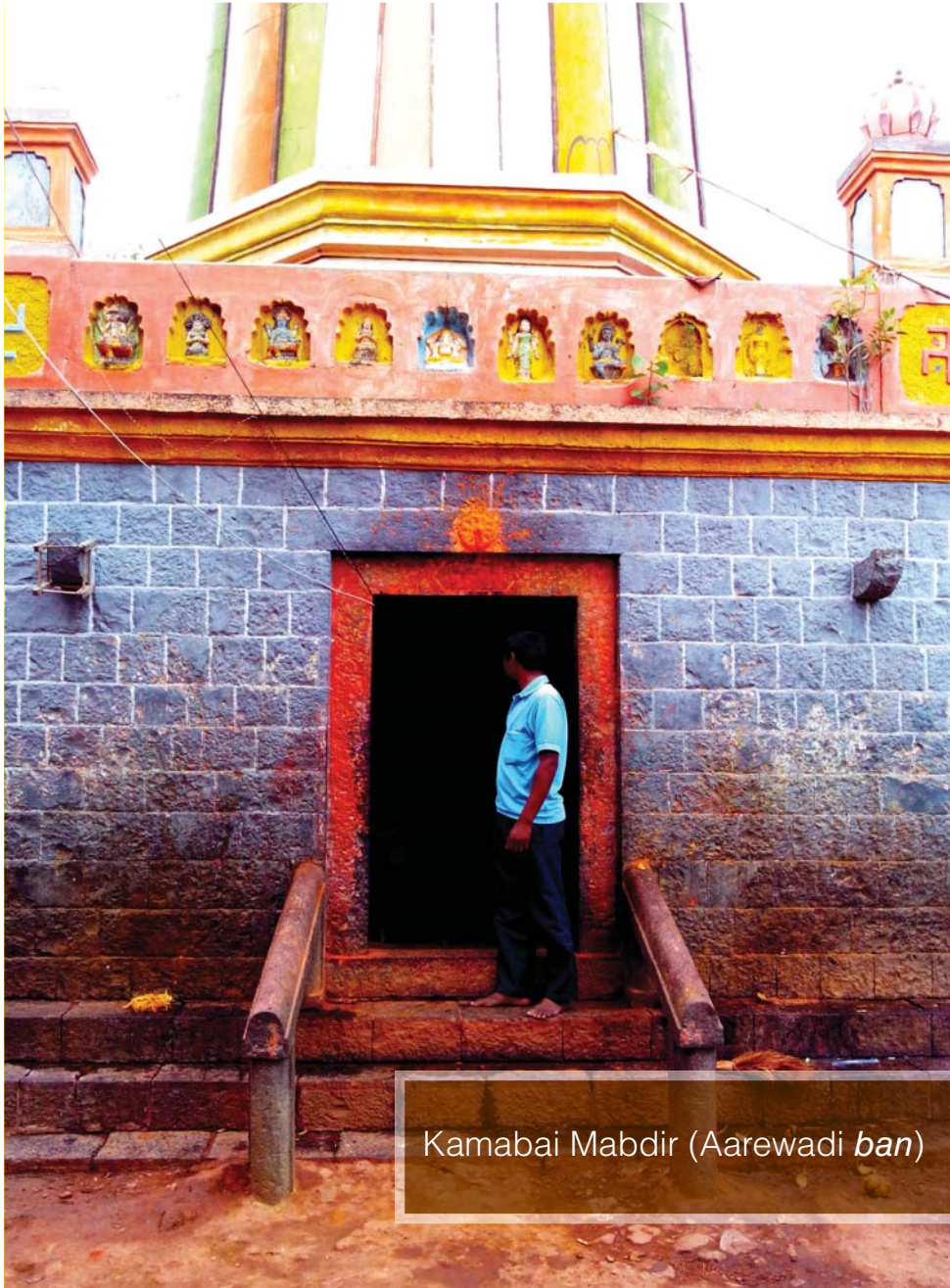
Temples and Gods

The *Dhangar* community has always preferred staying close to their gods. Wherever they migrated they carried their gods with them. The *Dhangars* are *Shaiv-panthik*, followers of lord *Shiva*. They worship him in all forms. He is seen in the houses across Aarewadi in the form of idols. The main reason for Aarewadi to exist is the Biroba temple, the *Dhangars* came here years ago to serve Biroba and continue to do so. They pray to him through their 'Ovi's. The Aarewadi Biroba temple houses two deities: Biroba and Suryoba, who are worshipped thrice a day. There are smaller temples dedicated to more Demi-gods in the environs. The Biroba temple itself was much small, but the donations from the devotees have helped build a bigger edifice and beautify the surroundings. It is said that Biroba roamed the whole earth and finally found Aarewadi the place to settle down. He shepherded his flock here. There

are two temples dedicated to his wife Kamabai and his sister Mayakka, who took care of him as a child. The temple is the focus of Aarewadi's social life. It is a place not only to serve the god but also to meet up, talk, and hence the temple is always crowded. Thrice a day, The Lord is worshipped amidst much fanfare and is taken about in a pious procession. May all be well in the name Biroba, in the name of Mayakka, in the name of Kamabai, in such cries the whole area is drowned. The holy turmeric powder called the *Bhandara* is smeared on The Lord's idol with much reverence and the same is then smeared across the head by the devotees. Aarewadi is a place where the *Dhangars* from across India congregate. They meet up twice a year to serve the god with unmatched fervour. They sing his praise through the 'ovi's and perform the *Gaj* dance.



Biroba *Ban* Mandir (Aarewadi Ban)



Kamabai Mabdri (Arewadi ban)





Rakshak (Protectors) of Biroba





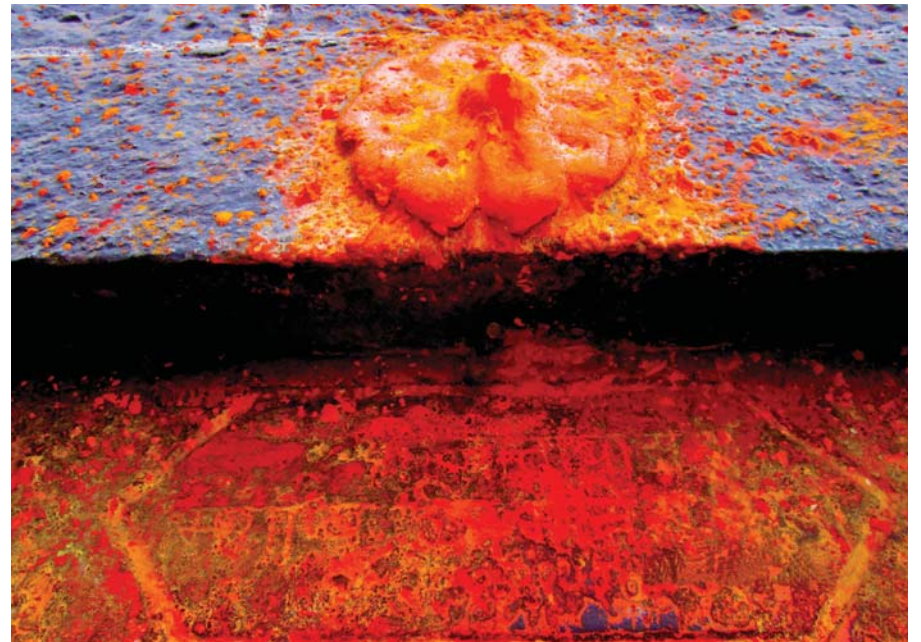


Dhangars worship their gods with *Bhandara*(turmeric Powder)



Kamabaai & Biroba

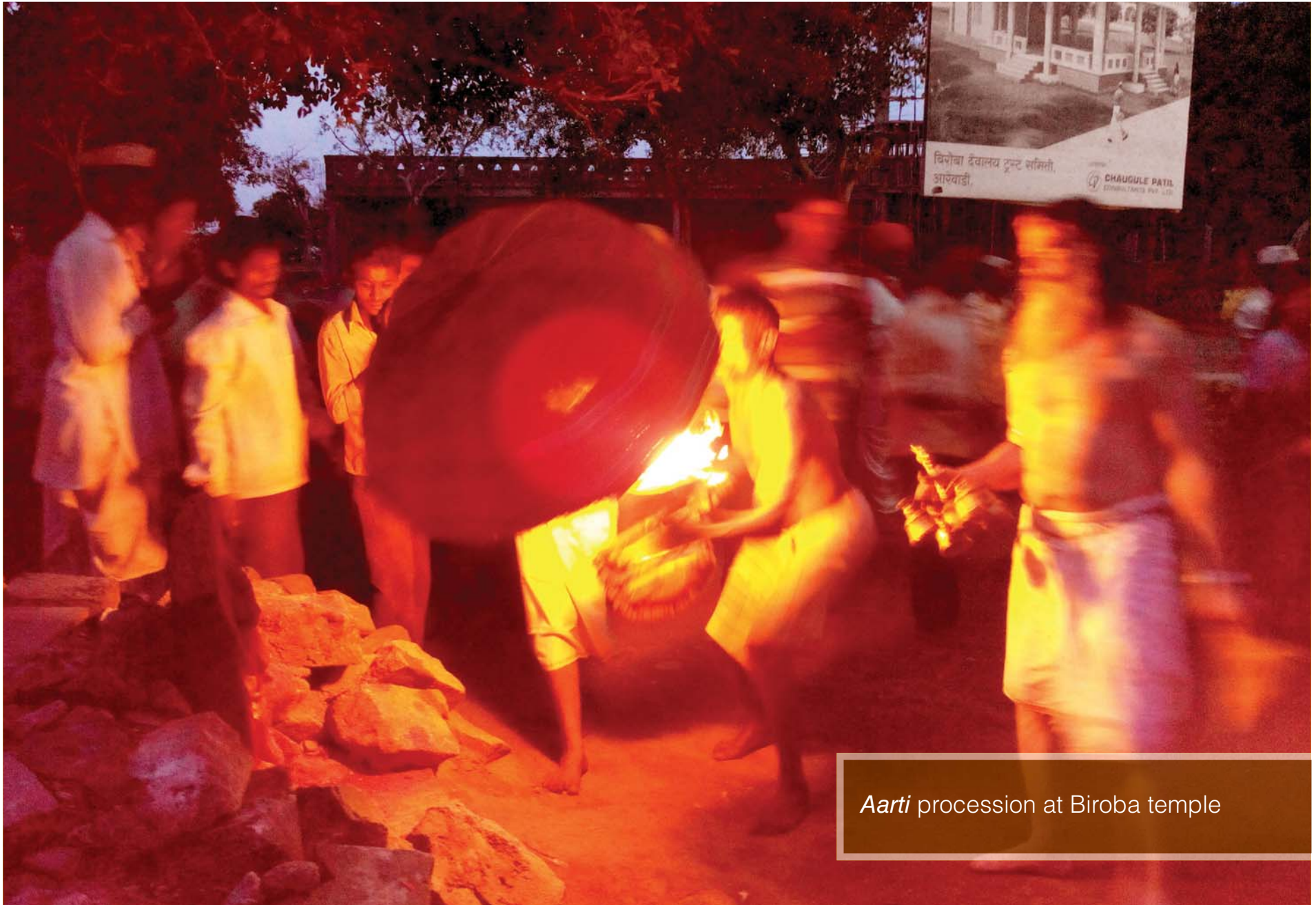












Aarti procession at Biroba temple





Aarti procession at Biroba temple



People comes from different villages' and they stay in temple campus to serve Biroba







Veers (warrior ancestors) from family







Taak



Khandoba

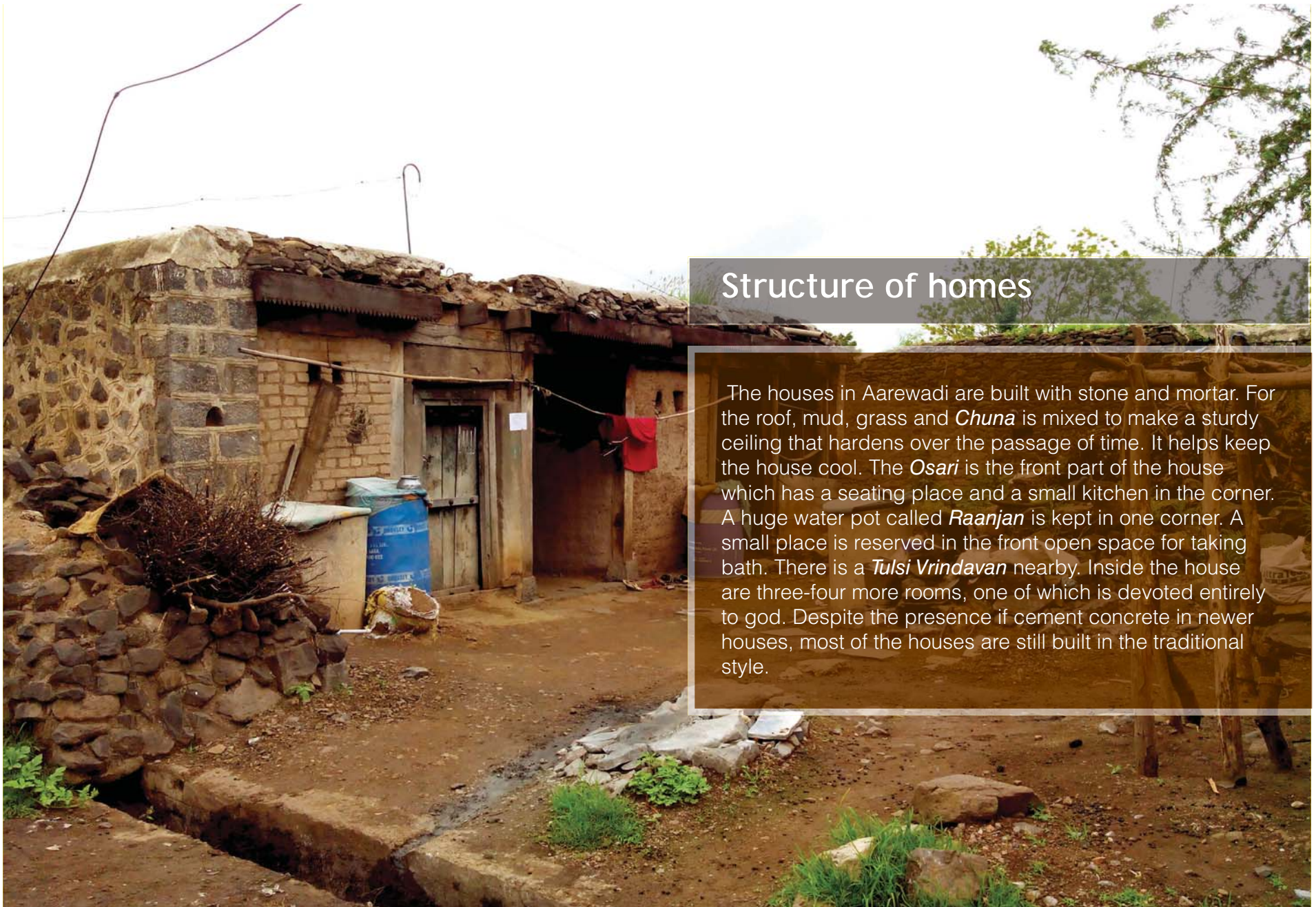


Biroba



Khandoba

Tulja Bhavani



Structure of homes

The houses in Aarewadi are built with stone and mortar. For the roof, mud, grass and *Chuna* is mixed to make a sturdy ceiling that hardens over the passage of time. It helps keep the house cool. The *Osari* is the front part of the house which has a seating place and a small kitchen in the corner. A huge water pot called *Raanjan* is kept in one corner. A small place is reserved in the front open space for taking bath. There is a *Tulsi Vrindavan* nearby. Inside the house are three-four more rooms, one of which is devoted entirely to god. Despite the presence of cement concrete in newer houses, most of the houses are still built in the traditional style.































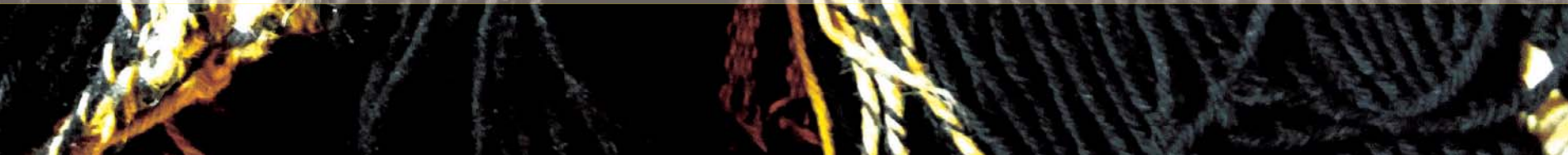


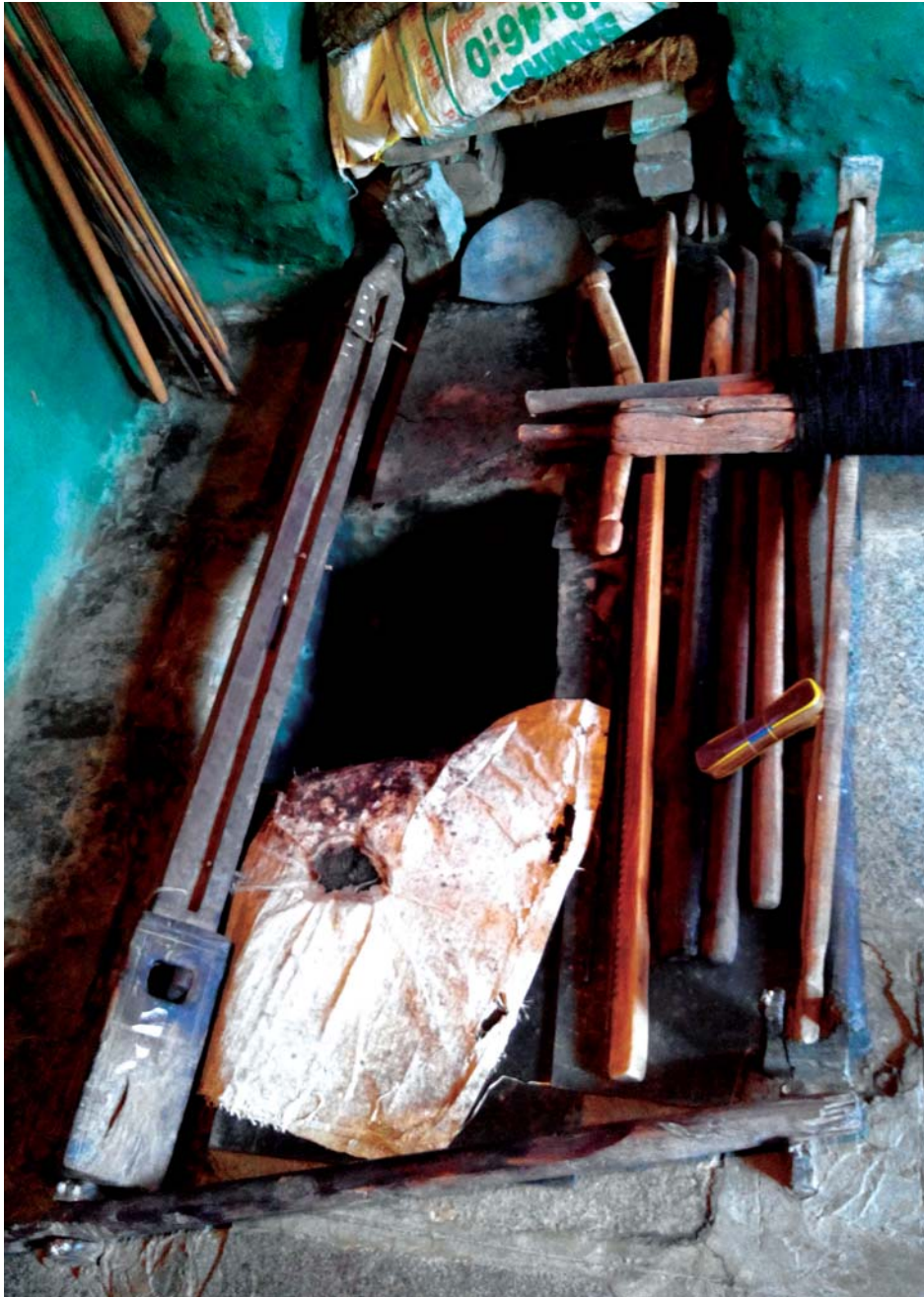
Blanket making

Quilts or blankets called the *Ghongdi* are very typical symbols of the Dhangar community. This accessory has been accorded special importance. It has to be present on every auspicious occasion and is considered as the holy cloth. It is of particular help to this herding community as the quilt can be useful on more than one occasion. In case the shepherd is tired during the course of the day, he can just lay down the quilt and sleep on it. Also, since it hardly allows any water to percolate, it is also useful in the rains. There are two types, the full black ones are used normally, the ones with three white stripes are sacred and used only during poojas and other ceremonies. One is not even supposed to sit on them. The women are not supposed to use it. The three stripes symbolise the ash smeared across Lord Shiva's forehead. While herding the flock, the dhangars carry a loom and weave threads from it.

They then give this thread to the *Sangars*, who then weave the quilts from it. The *Sangars* are a sub-community of the *Dhangars*.

There are only three quilt weavers left in Aarewadi area. Not many people use the quilts nowadays and hence there is not much demand for the weavers too. Shahaji Raut is one such weaver, one of the remaining few. He weaves the quilts on his hand loom in his small house. He told me how he gets the Lokar threads from the dhangars and makes a '*Taana*' from it by tying it backwards. It is only then that the actual weaving can begin. The weaver gets a meagre 200 rupees for a quilt that can be sold as high as 2000 rupees in the market. It takes around 2-3 days to weave one quilt. The plight of these weavers is sad and their skills face imminent disappearance in the near future, unless we intervene.

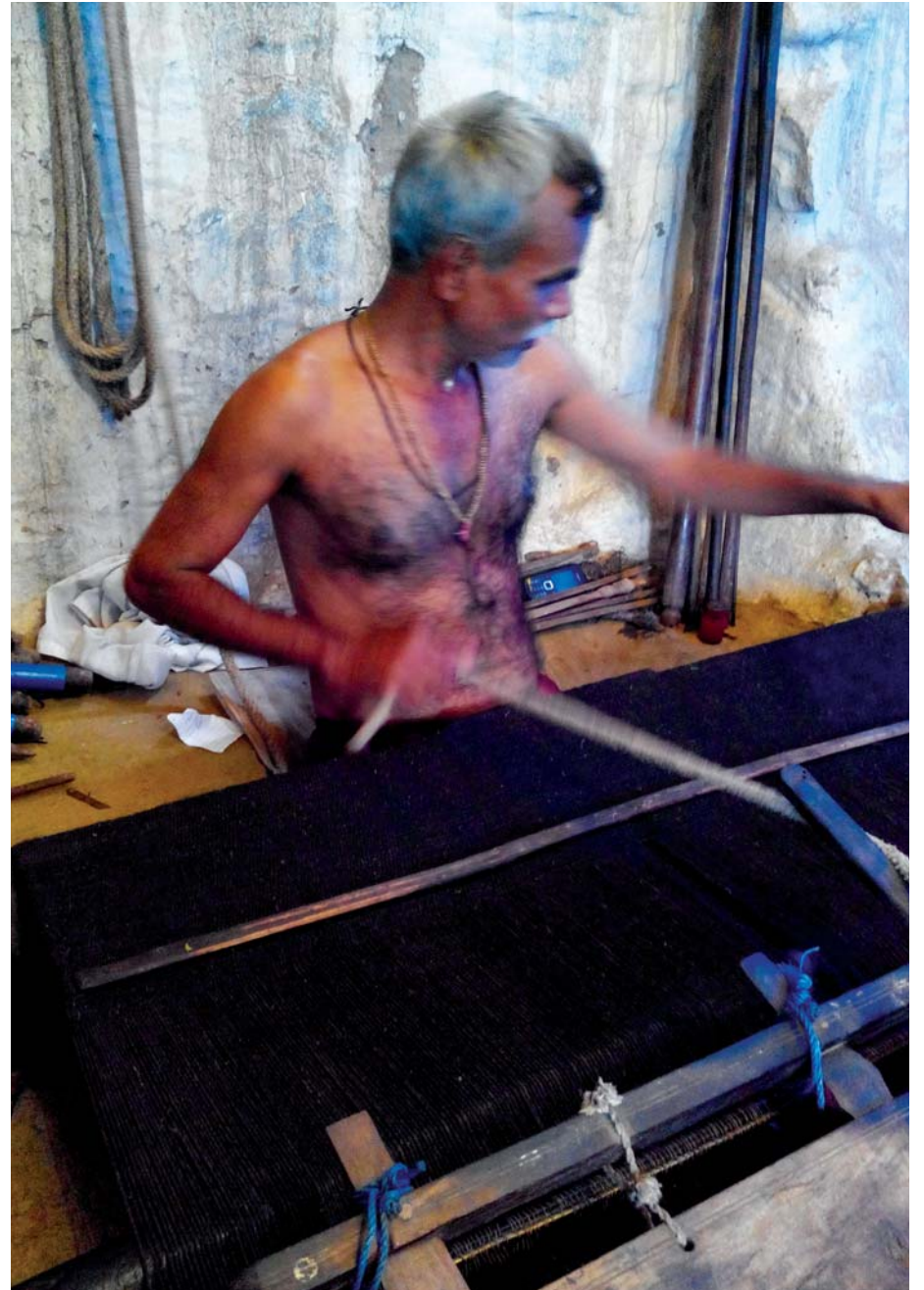
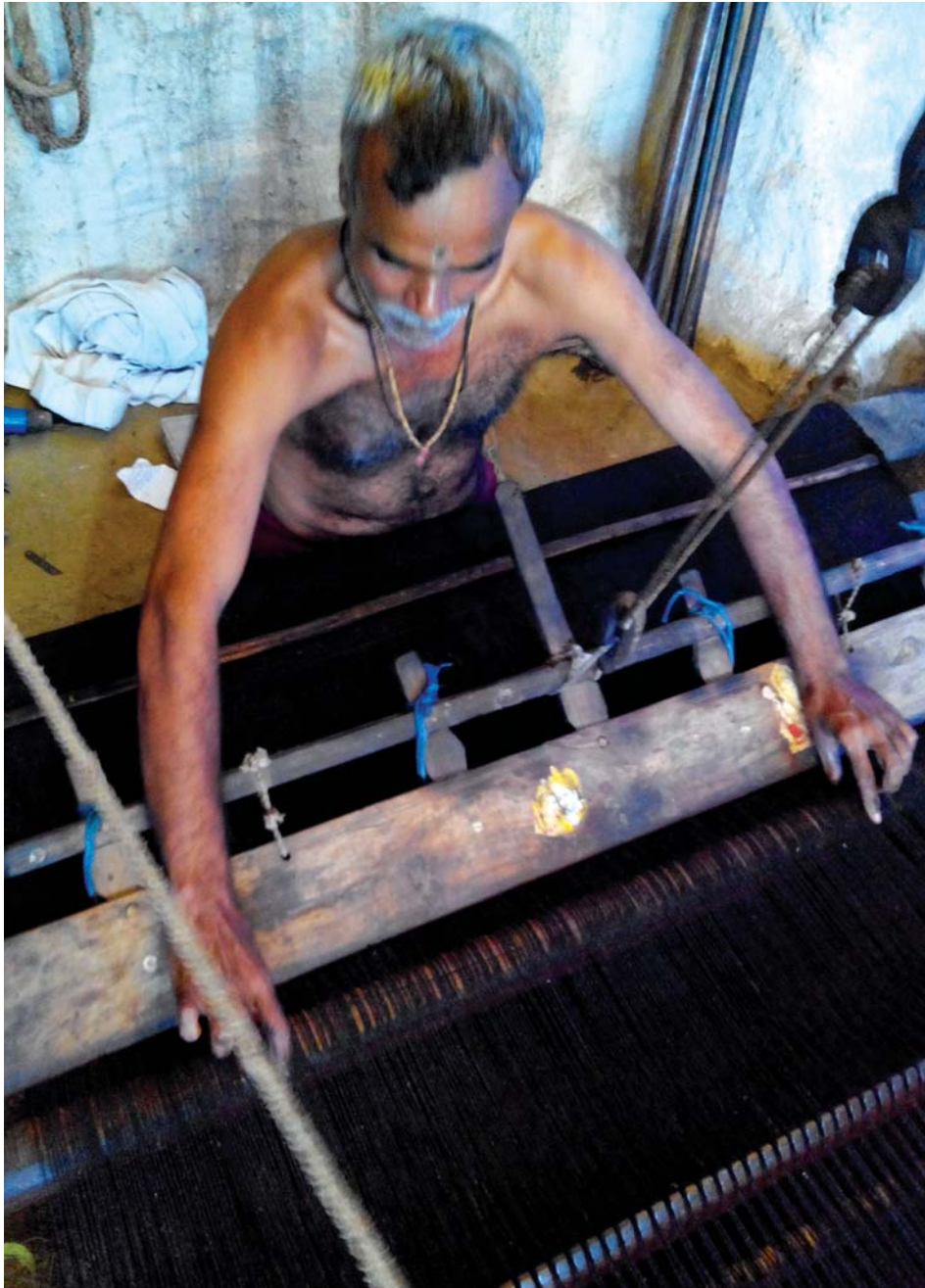

















A man with a mustache, wearing a white shirt and a red shawl with a floral pattern, stands in a room. Behind him are several large, round, wooden musical instruments, possibly dhungars, mounted on stands. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

“Biroba aamcha Kulaswami shekdo varshanpurvi to ithe Aarewadit yeun rahila aani Karnatakaton aamche purvaj tyachya sevesathi ithe aani ithech rahile”


(“Biroba is the deity of my family. It is believed that hundreds of years ago, he came and took up residence here in Aarewadi. My ancestors migrated from Karnataka to serve him and they have stayed ever since”)

Conversation with people

Balasaheb Biru Kolekar The priest

He is the priest of our family and he helped us in getting around Aarewadi. He performs the **Gaj** dance and also sings the **Ovis**. He organises small events of such song and dance through a small troupe of his own. With assistance

from the government, these **Dhangars** have performed worldwide including Russia, France, and so on. He was the prime source of information on the **Dhangar** community's customs and traditions.




*“Maze dagine majhya aai vadilani
mazya lagnat mala dile hote. aajahi
me te japun thevlet majyajawal tyanchi
aathvan mhanun”*

*(“These jewels were given to me by my Ostend on the
occasion of my marriage. I have safeguarded them to
this day for their memory.”)*

Housabai Kolekar

She gracefully agreed to show us her ornaments and other prized possessions, including the *Bindli* in her hands, which were given to her at the time of her marriage by her mother. She also took us around the village to women with similar possessions.




“Aajahi Dhangar lok majhyakade junya daginyanchi magni kartat, yatun kalta ki tyana tyanchya sanskruticha abhiman aahe.”

(“Even to this day people come seeking the traditional jewellery designs of the Dhangars. The Dhangars take pride in their rich cultural heritage.”)

Rajaram Vinayak Mahamuni

He is a goldsmith, a *Sonar*, staying in the nearby market. His business is family owned over generations and they know every family in Aarewadi. This is because many generations of residents have made their ornaments here. He showed us the older designs of the *Dhangar* jewellery.

Some older ornaments that had come to him to be broken down, were instead carefully preserved by him, maybe because he realises their value in terms of culture. He also demonstrated how silver ornaments are made.



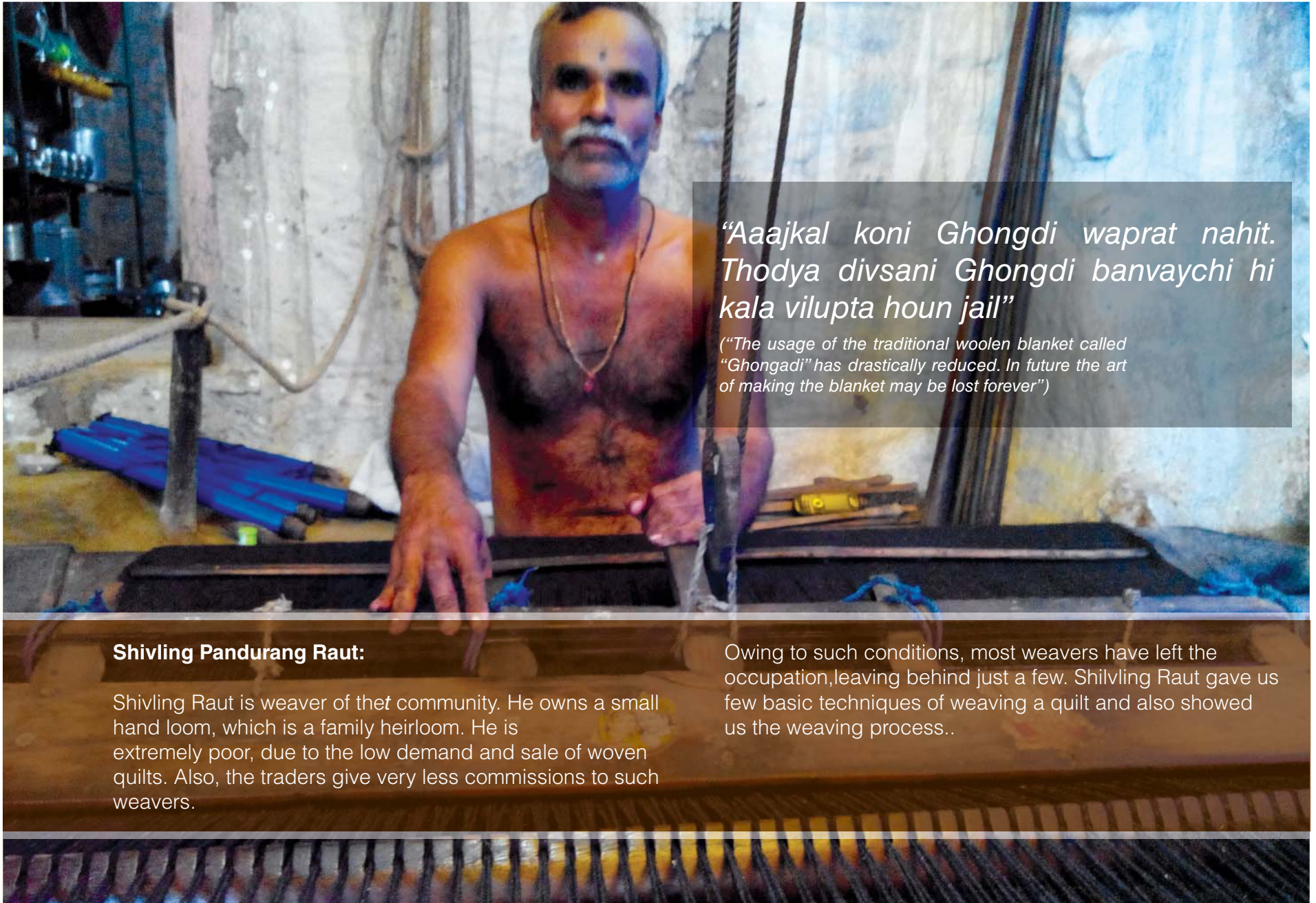
“Me majhya aaila hya Birobachya goshti Ovyanmadhun gatana aaikla aahe. Jevha me hya Ovy gate tevha mala majhya aaichi aathvan yete”

(“My childhood memories are full of my mother singing the Ovis of Biroba and listening to her narrating his stories. Today, when I recollect the songs and sing them, I can feel the presence of my mother.”)

Sakhubai Shreerang Kolekar

Sakhubai is famous in Aarewadi owing to her talent of singing the '*Jaatya varil ovy*' or the Ovis sung while beating the dough. The jaata is a huge circular stone mill used to crush grains and cereal into pulp. We went to her home to specially listen to her. She enthusiastically arranged everything in the heavy stone

mill and started singing. The Deep rumbling sound of the stone crushing adds life to this earthy tune. She sang an *Ovi* of how her lord Biroba came to marry Kamabai. Another *Ovi* sang of Biroba's forest, of all the forest's residents, birds and animals. It is a different experience to sit down and listen to such wonderful songs.



*“Aajkal koni Ghongdi waprati nahit.
Thodya divsani Ghongdi banvaychi hi
kala vilupta houn jail”*

*(“The usage of the traditional woolen blanket called
“Ghongadi” has drastically reduced. In future the art
of making the blanket may be lost forever”)*

Shivling Pandurang Raut:

Shivling Raut is a weaver of this community. He owns a small handloom, which is a family heirloom. He is extremely poor, due to the low demand and sale of woven quilts. Also, the traders give very less commissions to such weavers.

Owing to such conditions, most weavers have left the occupation, leaving behind just a few. Shivling Raut gave us a few basic techniques of weaving a quilt and also showed us the weaving process..



Conclusion

It was a different experience to visit Aarewadi and spend a few days observing the Dhangar lifestyle. Such experiences always appeal to the urban heart. Such lives and such conditions are seldom known to us. It was a very important learning for me as a visual ethnographer, to look closely at their lives by staying amongst them. While speaking to the people of Aarewadi, I realised that this one small corner of the world, the *Dhangars* are fighting hard to preserve their way of life and pass it on to the future generations despite the inevitable modernisation. There is a certain sense of grandeur and identity in their attire and ornaments.

This is highly uncommon and distinct from other communities. It is this identity that the folks at Aarewadi have preserved. In their *Ovis*, they sing of their Gods, their brave ancestors. I had visited the place for a very short period of time and within that period I have tried my level best to collect the precious elements from their cultural.

Their culture is infinitely so rich, that a deep thorough research could be done on various things say for their gods, culture of *Ovis*, Brave legends from history, Rituals & Overall lifestyle. Here we take their leave and wish that as long as the sun and moon continue to rise, may these *Ovis* be sung by the *Dhangars* of Aarewadi.

Changbhala! May all be well!

*My mother
with old lady*

Glossary

**Dhangar- Shepherd.*

**Ovi- Holy message or the poem which narrate stories.*

**Dhol- Drum.*

**Kaital- musical instrument.*

**Ban- Forest.*

**Patil- is an Indian title or surname. Territory granted to the Patil is usually referred to as the patilki or watandar. The Patil is in effect the ruler of this territory as he was entitled to the revenues collected therefrom. Many Patils were warriors in the Maratha army. Patil is also a surname in Maratha.*

**Jatra- Hindu pilgrimage festivals.*

**Dhan- wealth.*

**Gaji- Dance form performed by Shepherds from Maharashtra.*

**Bhandara- Turmeric powder.*

**Bundy- Sleeveless Jacket.*

**Dhoti- White cotton Loin Cloth.*

**Mundasa- Nine yard colorful cloth wrapped in certain way on head.*

**Toda- Silver bracelet.*

**Kada- Silver thick bangle.*

**Taak- gods image embossed on Silver foil in Quinquennial shape.*

**Kashtha- Tradition way of wrapping nine yard saree from Maharashtra region.*

**Kunku- Red colour Powder.*

**Padar- Open end of Saree.*

**Masspatta- Silver waist band.*

**Zube- Earrings like Umbrella.*

**Masolya- Silver toe rings in with the shape of fish.*

**Jodvi- Silver toe rings.*

**Nuth- Nose ring with pearls.*

**Veer- Brave.*

**Sudrah- Long Shirt.*

**Choli- Blouse.*

**Khan- Fabric of Blouse.*

**Mukut- Crown.*

**Tulshi vrindavan- Particular Pot to put holy Tulasi plant.*

**Suryaful- Sunflower.*

**Ramacha bashing- Headgear of Lord Rama.*

**Ramacha Rath- Chariot of Lord Rama.*

**Nagoba- Cobra.*

**Panth- Spiritual path.*

**Aarti- Regular ritual performed by Hindu people to worship their gods.*

**Chuna- Lime.*

**Osari- open platform.*

**Raanjan- Huge Pot to contain water.*

**Ghongdi- Woolen blanket.*

**Sangar- Sub cast of shepherd people who weave Woolen blanket.*

**Taana- Thread setting of loom.*

**Sonar- Goldsmith.*

**Jata- Traditional grain grinder.*

**Changbhala- It's a term Dhangar people use while Worshiping their gods. Changbhala means may all be well.*

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