CHAPTER : TWO
THE ECOLOGICAL SETTINGS AND THE PEOPLE

Madhya Pradesh, situated between 17.0° and 27.0° N latitudes and between 74.0° and 80.0° E longitudes, came into existence as one of the States of India in 1956 under the States Re-organization. It is the largest state in the country with 4,43,500 sq. km. in area. It is also the 6th most populous state in the country with a population of 521.8 lakhs. The density of population of the state is 118 per sq. km. The State is divided into 45 districts for administrative convenience. The terrain is plateau with mean level of 1600 ft. interspersed with the mountain ranges of the Vindhya and Satpura (of the Deccan Plateau) and the valleys of Narmada and Tapti rivers. In addition to Narmada and Tapti, the other main rivers draining the state are the Chambal, Betwa, Sindh, Mahanadi and Indravati. The state receives an average annual rainfall of 70 to 150 cms.

India has a scheduled tribal population of 5,16,28,638 which forms about 7.6 per cent. The state of Madhya Pradesh has the largest tribal population forming about 21.0 per cent of total population of the State (Census of India, 1981). The scheduled area of the state covers 13 out of 45 districts. This forms 15% of the total area of the State. This area harbours about one-third of the tribal population of the state. Over 50% of the population of 38 tahsil, outside the scheduled area, also consists of the tribals (Fig. 1).

Regions and Tribes

On the basis of physical, socio-economic and ecological characteristics, the state could be categorized into four distinct Regions (Dube and Bahadur,
Fig. 1. MAP OF MADHYA PRADESH SHOWING THE SELECTED BLOCKS OF STUDY
(1967) and Government of Madhya Pradesh (1977): Western, Central, Eastern and Southern. The Western Region consists of the districts of Dhar, Jhabua, Khargone and Ratlam. This region is inhabited mainly by Bhils, Bhilalas and Patellas. The districts of Betul, Chhindwara, Shahadol, Balaghat, Mandla and Seoni constitute the Central Region. The major tribals inhabiting this region are the Gonds, Baigas Kols, Korkus and Pardhans. The Eastern Region comprises of Sarguja, Raigarh, and Bilaspur districts inhabited by the tribals like Oraons, Korwas, Gonds and Kanwars. Bastar, Raipur and Durg districts constitute the Southern Region. The Muria and Maria Gonds and the Halbas constitute the main tribal groups in this Region. Three districts, one from each of the Western, Southern and Eastern regions have been selected for the study each area representing the non-forest (least forest), forest and intermediate zones respectively. The district of Jhabua represents the least forest area and the Bastar district the maximum forest area while Sarguja district represents the intermediate category.

**Jhabua District of the Western Zone**

The Jhabua district covers an area of 6,800 sq. km. and has a total population of 6,18,988 according to the 1981 census. The entire district is declared as a scheduled area in view of about 90% of the population being tribal. The density of population of the district is 91 per sq. km.

The district has mountainous and hilly terrain which is subjected to soil erosion. Over 17% of the land is under forest cover. The annual rainfall ranges between 60 and 80 cms. The average temperature during winter ranges from 10.0° C to 12.5° C while in summer it is between 37.5° and 40.0° C. The western fringes of Jhabua possess red soil with loamy
texture. A little more than one-half (54.0%) of the land in the district is cultivated. Barring a small proportion (3.07%), the rest of the area is rainfed. The per capita area cultivated works out to be about 0.6 hectares. Pulses, maize and millets form the main crops of the district which are grown in about two-thirds of the total cultivable area. Paddy is grown in about 9.0% of the cultivable area and the oil seeds are produced in about 7.0% of the area.

As elsewhere in the country, there are two main agricultural seasons, Rabi and Kharif, known locally as 'Kurar' and 'Choumasa' respectively. The 'Choumasa' season starts in June-July and ends in September-October. The main crops raised in this season are jowar, maize, pulses, oilseeds, paddy and cotton. The 'Kurar' season starts in October-November and ends in February-March. Wheat and grams form the main crops of the season.

One-third of the population of this district comprises of workers. Majority of them (85%) are engaged in agriculture and the rest are working as agricultural labourers. The total literacy level in the district is about 5.0%.

Bhils forming an important and populous tribal group of the district has been selected for the study.

Jhabua Block

The total population of Jhabua, one of the blocks selected for the study, is about 59,000 according to 1981 census. Over 90% of the people of the block are tribals. About 32% of them are agricultural workers of which majority (86.0%) are cultivators and 9% are labourers. The literacy rate (3.0%) is very low. Only 70.0% of the land area is cultivable of which
77% is cropped. Maize which is grown in 43% of the total cropped area forms the major food crop of the area. The other crops grown in small proportions of the area are paddy (10.0%), other millets (8.0%), pulses (5.0%) and oilseeds (8.0%).

Kathiawara Block

This is another block of the study situated in the South-Western part of Jhabua bordering the state of Madhya Pradesh with Gujarat. About 40% of its total geographical area is covered by forests including the species of feni teak (*Tectona grandis*), mango (*Mangifera indica*) and Cashewnut (*Anacardium occidentale*) plantations. Another 43% of the total area is classified as cultivable area of which 74.0% is covered by such important crops as pulses, millets, maize and paddy. The per capita irrigated area works out to be 0.4 hectares.

The block has a total population of 43,036 according to 1981 census of which 86% are tribals. Nearly one-third population of the block is engaged in agriculture of which 38% are labourers. Only 4% of the population is enumerated as literates.

The People of Jhabua and Kathiawara

The Bhils, one of the populous tribal groups of Madhya Pradesh, are the inhabitants of these blocks. However, other groups like Bhilalas, Patelias and Barelas also inhabit the area. These groups live in hutments arranged in small groups scattered over the hilly tracts and on slopes of the valleys. The main villages are small usually consisting of 30-40 households. The hamlets (Paras) are located at a distance of 1 to 3 km. from each other and are connected by bridal paths made through the forests. Very
often the people build their houses in agricultural fields. This improper and poor communication system constitutes the main impediment in taking the development programmes to these areas.

Sarguja District of Eastern Zone

The Sarguja district was formed with Ambikapur as its headquarter town by merging the three feudatory estates, viz., Sarguja, Chand Bhakar and Korea. The district is situated at 609 meters from mean sea level between the latitudes 23°.28 N and 24°.6 N and between the longitudes 81°.35E and 84°.51E. The temperature ranges between 5° C and 10° C in winter and between 35.0° C and 42.5° C in summer. The annual rainfall ranges from 100-140 cm. In terms of land area (22,237 sq. km), this is the second largest district in the state. Forests cover about 52.0% of the area. The density of the population is 73 per sq. km. in 1981 as against 59 in 1971. The tribals constitute 54% of the total population (1981 census). About 36% of the total population is engaged in agricultural work, two-thirds being cultivators and the rest working as labourers and other occupations. According to 1981 census the average male literacy rate is 16% while the female literacy is much lower (4.8%). The cultivable area forms about 31% of the total geographical area. Paddy is grown in about 56.0% of the cultivable area. The other crops are pulses and oilseeds occupying 12.0% and 10.2% of the cultivable area respectively.

Pratapur Block

The Pratapur block selected for the study is one of the six tribal developmental blocks of Sarguja district. It is located in the Middle-Eastern part of the district bounded by the Pul tahsil in the North-East and Ambikapur tahsil in the South-East.
About one-fourth of the total geographical area of the block (95,000 hectares) constitutes forest cover while a third of it only is cultivable. In seventy per cent of the cultivable land the main crops grown is paddy, which covers 87% of the area. In the rest of the area wheat, jowar, ragi and pulses are grown. The main forest products are Sal (Shorea robusta), Tendu (Diospyros melanoxylon), Amla (Phyllanthus emblica), Khair (Acacia catechu), Harra (Terminalia chebula), Bahera (Chloroxylon swietenia) and Char (Buchanania latifolia). The block population is 59,000, 35% of which comprises the agricultural workers and the rest cultivators.

Khadgaon Block

This block is situated in the South-Western corner of the Sarguja district. To the south of the block are the coal mines, to its northeast is the Baikuntapur tahsil and to its north is the Bartunga hill. 19% of the total land area (66,100 hectares) is covered by the forest. A very large area is under coal mining. About 41% of the total area is cultivable.

The most important and populous tribal groups living in the district are Gonds, Oraons, Karwars and Nagesias. The relatively more backward and less populous groups are Korwas including Koodus, Baigas, Birhors, Kharias and Bunjhar. Cultivators (72%) are in majority while labourers (11.7%) are in small proportion.

Bastar District of the Southern Zone

Historically the Chatrakot kingdom was established by a Nagwans family with Barsur as headquarters. The Kakatiya king Annam Deo won the battles and he and his successors ruled the area for 600 years from 1313 A.D. to 1948 A.D. with Bastar as its headquarters. Kanker was established by Bir Kanher Deo, a Somavansi King.
The Bastar district formed with the merger of erstwhile Bastar and Kanker states is the heart of the region called Dandakaranya. The geographic configuration is a succession of undulating ridges with intervening valleys through which flow innumerable streams and rivulets. These merge themselves in the Indravathi, Sabri and Mahanadi rivers. The former two rivers pass through the central and southern parts of the district and join to form Godavari.

The total geographic area of the district is 3,90,600 hectares of which 70% area is under forest. The forests are unique in the country where sal and teak are found together. It is held that Bastar forests are capable of supporting large industrial complex of forest-based industries as they can sustain an annual cut of 3.14 million cubic meters of wood which is about 14% of the total estimated industrial wood requirement (22 million cu meters) of the country. Besides this Bastar forests are a good source of bamboo and are capable of supplying 0.32 million tonnes of bamboo annually (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 1972).

Iron ore deposits of Bailadilla, Rowghat are Aridongri, cement grade and blendable cement grade limestone of Kanger belt and Potenar Barangji area of quartz of Jhiram are some of the mineral resources of this district. The cultivable area accounts for 43.2% of the total geographical area of which 53.2% is used for raising different food crops. Paddy and millets are the main crops.

The minor forest produce of the area are gum, Mohua flowers and seeds, phulbani broom, cocoons and harra. Tamarind, tendu leaves, honey, lac and serpertia are also available.
The temperature ranges from \(10^\circ\) C in winter to \(42-43^\circ\) C in summer. The annual rainfall ranges from 140-160 cm. The tribals constitute nearly 70% of the total population of the block (14.5 lakhs). A little more than a third (36%) are agricultural workers. About 69% of them cultivators and 23% are labourers. The two blocks selected from this district for study are Geedam and Pharasgaon respectively. Each of these are dealt with as under:

**Geedam Block**

The total geographical area of the block is 59,582 hectares. The forest area constitutes 44% of the total land area. About 43% of the total area of the block is cultivable and almost all (98%) of the area is cultivated for growing some crops or the other. Paddy constitutes the main crop occupying 66% of the total cropped area. In the rest millets, oilseeds and pulses are grown. The Geedam block has a total population of about 93,000 of which 85% includes scheduled tribals. The density of population of the block is 44 per sq. km.

42.7% of the people are enumerated as workers. Majority of them are agriculturists or cultivators (84.8%) and the rest (13.7%) are agricultural labourers. The literacy rate is very low (5.0%).

**Pharasgaon Block**

Pharasgaon is one of the 28 tribal development blocks of the Bastar district situated to the north of Jagdalpur. The block covers an area of 63,907 hectares. Over one-half (54.8%) of the total area is forest. The total population of the block is 43,000 of which 70.6% consists of tribals.
The density of population is 19 per sq. km. About one-third of the area is cultivable. The most important crops are paddy (occupying 78% of the cropped area) and millets and oilseeds occupying about 8 to 9% of the cropped area each.

Only 30.0% of the people of the block are classified as workers. Majority of them are agriculturists (76%) followed by labourers (16.0%) and artisans (40%). The literacy rate is about 8.0%.

The Bhils

The word 'Bhil' according to Oppert (1972) is derived from the word 'Phyllital' used by Ptolemy in 150 AD meaning 'leaf clad'. Another derivation of the word is from the Dravidian word 'Billa' or 'Bils' signifying 'Bow', a personal weapon carried by Bhils (Gustav, 1893). It is applied to all 'Bowmen' without distinction (Crocke, 1974; Russel and Lal, 1975). 'Billa' is used to refer to all the forest people of Vindhya.

Katha-Sarit-Sagara of Gunadhyia mentioned a Bhil chief fighting with an onward marching of enemy (Enthoven, 1975). ParasharaSamhita shows that the Bhils were born of Brahmin to Tavara father. Eklavya, the famous archer was the son of Hryadyaro, a Bhil King. He was the one who had offered his right thumb to Dronacharya as 'Gurudakshina'. Even the present day Bhils pull the arrow of their bow with fore and middle fingers, i.e., thumb is excluded.

The Bhils were the ruling race in Banswara (Chauhan, 1970) and Oguna Pormora (Udaipur) in Rajputana (Todd, 1972). The Rajputs conquered the Bhil areas and ill-treated them. As a result, the Bhils have taken to
decoity and high way robbery. The British policy of gentleness and kindness coupled with punishment changed the Bhils' attitude. 'With the passage of time, the Bhils gradually started giving up high way robbery and their anti-social activities' (Verma, 1978). Herbert Risely (1915) classified the Bhils of Rajputana as Dravidian. Guha (1951) found similarities between Tarvi Bhils and the Crenchus of Farhabad hills. Majumdar (1944) observed somatological differences between the Bhils of West Khandesh of Maharashtra and those of Panch Mahal of Gujarat. He attributed this to the racial admixture with the neighbouring castes and tribes. The Bhilli language was included in the Kolarian group by Campbell. Thompson (1975) considered it a corrupt form of Gujarati.

Gonds

The Gonds are one of the most numerous tribes in India. Their habitat is extensive covering the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. The land of Gonds was called Gondwana and included Satpura plateau, the Narmada Valley and a section of the Nagpur plains. The Gond chiefs ruled over Chandrapur, B尔斯ur and Dantewara. The Gonds call themselves as 'Koi' or 'Kotor' irrespective of their habitat, while their neighbours called them by different names in different regions. The Gonds living in Bastar and Sarguja are known as Muria and Maria Gonds while those inhabiting the Abhujmar hills are known as Hill Marias.

Gondi, influenced by the languages of the neighbours, is spoken by Gonds in the different regions. In terms of culture and language Marias and Murias resemble each other (Majumdar, 1944; Rakshit, 1974).

The Gonds are classified as Dravidians (Haddon, 1929) with dolicocephalic head, Mesorrhine nose and medium-statured (Grigson, 1938). Anthropometrically,
the Murias, the Hill Murias and the Bison Horn Marias are nearer to each other (Rakshit, 1974).

Genetic Similarities between Gonds and Bhils

The Gonds are dolicocephalic, mesorrhine and medium-statured with brown skin and wavy hair. They have scanty hair on the body. They have heavy nose with extended alae. Similarly, the Bhils are also dolicocephalic, mesorrhine and medium-statured and flat-nosed with extended alae. Rakshit (1974) considers the Gonds and the Bhils akin to each other in physical features.

As shown in Table 1, the percentages of A, B, AB and O blood groups and the homozygous and heterozygous sickle cell haemoglobin are more or less similar in the Gonds of Bastar and Sarguja and the Bhils of Jhabua (Negi, 1967; Papiha et al., 1978; Mazumdar, 1980; Bhatia and Rao, 1987). Thus the Gonds of Bastar and Sarguja and the Bhils of Jhabua are considered genetically similar.
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The figures in the parentheses represent number of subjects.