

Chapter . 6

SON KOLIS .

Amidst the kaleidoscopic confusion that characterises the population of Bombay, the Son Kolis, the fishing people, stand out very distinct, retaining the essence of their traditional culture even today. Their degree of aloofness from the rest of the urban population, the slight amalgamation of the new with old, has presented a culture that is both elusive as well as intriguing.

This elusive quality proved too attractive to study their way of life, the extent to which they have been urbanised and their ancestry. The questions addressed in this research, to begin with are: are they as traditional as they look? are they the original settlers of Bombay and the Konkan Coast as most texts describe them to be? are they synonymous with the Mahadev Kolis and when did they cease being a tribe and why?

HABITATION: As attention has been drawn in the previous chapter there are various references to the tribe 'Koli' in a number of books, travellogues, documents and articles. And the one fact that is found common, underlying all these references, is that the Koli is always associated with the Bombay fishermen who are "older than the coconut palm, older than the Bhandari palm tapper are the Koli fishing folk of Bombay among whom, if in any one tribe, one must seek for the blood of the men of the Stone Age" (Gaz.Bom.City & Ils, II :2). In fact, Bombay of the olden day has been described as "the desolate islet of the Bombay Koli fishermen" (Da Cunha, 1900:5).

Enthoven (1922:257) generally places them as scattered all

along the north Konkan coast from Bassein to Vasai in Thana district upto Ratnagiri. This is true even today. Rothfield locates the Son Kolis from Harnai in Ratnagiri district, extending along the coastline to Asinala in Thana (Rothfield, 1911:278). But their main cluster concentrations can be found in and around Alibag, in Kolaba or Raigarh district and in Bombay city. It is for this reason that the studies have been restricted to the Koliwadas (the hamlets/villages of the Kolis) of the two talukas of Raigarh district, namely, Alibag and Murud. But Alibag seems to be their chief settlement and is the headquarters of their chief, the Sar Patil (Mah.State Gaz.Kolaba Dist:153-4). The Bombay Koliwadas have been ignored to a certain extent because Punekar (1959) has done an extensive study of the Son Kolis of Bombay (Punekar, 1959). Her work provided useful guideline for this research.

Through there are a sizeable number of references to the Kolis, the details of the sub-groups are scanty.

One of the earliest distinctions made amongst the various sub-groups of Kolis is found in Mahikavatichi Bakar (Narayan, 1863:12) which talks about the Hill Kolis and the Sea Kolis. The former might be a reference to the Mahadeo Kolis and the later to the Son Kolis. They are mentioned as the inhabitants of north time of Keshavacharya.

Sahyadri (Joglekar, 1952:465-66), a recent publication of a regional study of Maharashtra, refers to the levy of the Jobanpatti tax on Son Kolis by Kolabhai Angres and as a result the

Son Kolis migrated from Thal (in Alibag Taluka) and settled in Thana and Vesava (Versova, Bombay). The Kolabha Angres were finally outseated in 1799 with the fall of Manaji Angre II (Dhabu, 1939:258). Wilson (1876:9) talks about the 'Sona' Kuli as the predominating class of Kulis from Bombay to Surat.

According to one source (p.381) the conversion and assimilation of Son Kolis into Hinduism is precise and that it occurred about 250 years ago.

Sedgwick too has laid emphasis on the Son Kolis as being a definite sub-group of Kolis found mainly in southern half of the Konkan, and being very distinct from the Kolis in the northern Konkan.

The above references go on to prove the existence of the Son Kolis by the fifteenth century, if not before. This also depends if we accept the Sea Kolis of Keshvacharya to be synonymous with the 'Son Kolis'. In fact, apart from Enthoven (1922:257), we have Sherring (1879: 313) describing the Son Kolis as the sea-faring group of Bombay and Rothfield pointing out that 'the Son Koli community in many respects is the most interesting of the castes in the Kolaba district (Rothfield, 1911:278).

ETYMOLOGY: The etymology of the term 'Koli' has already been dealt with in the previous chapter. Now, we look for clues in the term 'Son' for understanding who were the Son Kolis and the origin of the Son Kolis.

Punekar narrates a number of possibilities which she came

across in the course of her study of texts as well as her own talks with the Son Kolis themselves. They are as follows:

(a) Maharashtriya Dnyankosha (Mah.State Gaz.Kolaba Dist:7-8) explains the origin of Son Kolis as described in Shiva Nibandha (Ketkar, 1924-25:Ka-834). According to the legend - god created a man from his expression Soham. He was known as Soham or Soma or Sage Mayat. His daughter Archinta, the wife of Kashyapa had a son called Mardhana. Mardhana's descendants came to be called Soma. But as the years passed, Mardhana departing from the life of virtue took to destruction. The angered sage Mayat cursed him to become a fisherman and thus in course of time, his descendants who also lived by fishing changed from Soma to Sona and finally to Son.

(b) Another similar story, which was narrated to her by a Koli is said to have been referred to in some Puranas:

Once while Siva and Parvati were having their rounds of the earth, they came across the sea. Siva overcame this hurdle by walking over the water, but Parvati refused to do so. One being questioned, she enquired, 'how would the men of the four varnas, created by you, cross these wide expanse of water'? So there was a need for a boatman. It seems that Siva coughed and adding some ash to the sputum, created a man. Due to the hissing and the 'kh' sound, the man and the (his) descendants came to be known as 'Son Kolis'. He was asked to take to fishing for his livelihood. As this was an act of killing and thence a sin, the penance was to apply water to his tuft of hair on the spot where he had caught the fish.



The above legend seems to be highly imaginary, most conceived by the brahmins to serve their own purpose. Another contradictory point that can be seen is that when Parvati requested Shiva for a boatman to be created, why give him the duty of fishing for his livelihood. He could have made ferrying people to and from his occupation, or even navigation and sailing, and the reference to the tuft of hair is a clear indication of a brahmanic influence, and one of the Koli sub-groups claim a brahmin as their ancestor.

Claiming to have Valmiki and a nisad girl for their ancestors along with various other non-brahmanic groups, viz. Agris, Warlis, etc., the Son Kolis again show the brahmanic influence that was being used to incorporate the above-mentioned groups with various other hill land forest tribes into Hinduism.

And yet again, not one of the Son Koli members with whom I have had the opportunity to speak during my study, professed to be anything but one of those belonging to the backward class and not a brahmin.

The Thana Gazetteer (Mah.State Gaz.Thana Dist.: 1982) in a footnote on 'Shron - Aparanta' derives the word 'Son' thus: the name for the Coastal Kolis of Thana who might have foreign blood comes from the word 'Son' or 'Sonag', 'a word for Yavana still in use in Southern India'. Yet another footnote (Mah.State Gaz.Thana Dist.:148) explain it as 'from Son (red) or from Sonag or Son (a stranger)'.  
149

(d) One of the Son Kolis enumerates that their name is associated with the bhandar or the turmeric powder which is sacred and holy to Khandoba, their kuladevata. This is applied to the forehead of the people daily and is scattered in great quantity during the Khandoba festivals. This turmeric powder, yellow or golden in colour gives the name 'Son'.

The above explanation too does not seem plausible because Khandoba is worshipped by many other tribes and castes. He is the kuladevata of the Mahadev Kolis, Marathas, Dhangars and a number of others groups and at Jejuri, during the month of paush (February/March) which is the main festival of Khandoba, all these people scatter bhandar - so why should the Son Kolis be the only one to be accorded that particular epithet?.

(e) Some of the Kolis with whom Punekar carried out interviews said that a Koli by the name of Taju Nakhva was so rich that he thought of using tiles made of gold for his house and thus the name came about. Reference to this can be found in a popular song:

Valya koli, paisacha jholi,  
sonari khavla gharo ghari,  
najar thevtoya choravari.

(Valya koli, has a purse of money,  
and golden tiles on every house,  
and Sohe's keeping a look out for thieves.)

(f) Another reason, as told by one Koli informant from Borli Mandla, was that the major concentration of Kolis earlier was in Bombay and that they were extremely wealthy (whatever may be the reason, they give it as boom in fishing). Thus the kolin (the Koli woman) was always bedecked with a lot of gold jewellery.

Thus these people came to be known as the golden people or the Son Kolis from the term 'Son' from 'Sona' or 'Sone'.

In fact, even today the Son Kolis is the envy of every other woman in Bombay with her heavy ear-rings which vary in weight from 6 gms to 18 gms and her other gold ornaments. Even if you have to mention the 'Kolis' the immediate retort is - they are surely very rich - look at their fabulous jewellery.

There can be another explanation as to why the Son Kolis stand at the pinnacle of hierarchy - echoes in Sir Baine's writings "As water is the element above all through which personal contamination can be conveyed, the privileged position thus conferred upon the casts question (kolis involved in fishing) became assured. But then if the question of pre-usage had anything to do with water then why don't the Mangley Koli and Vaitey Kolis not be a part of this privilege? (Baines 1912:67).

ORIGINS: But, who exactly are they - the Son Kolis? Were they always on the coast, fishing? If not, when did this sub-group come into existence, and how?

My hypothesis gives emphasis to the third explanation propounded by Punekar, the one referring to the Yavana and the stranger. Any man can be very well described as a silk-worm spinning its own cocoon of silk, weaving around himself a delicate and intricate fabric of relationships that go to make up a composite culture (Hutchinson, 1984:iiva). But, if he were to commit even the slightest of mistakes, to snap even one of the delicately threads that bind him, he ends up an outsider -- alone,



abandoned and excommunicated. Community isolated him and he has to try and build another cocoon around himself. This new cocoon could be termed as culture "B" whereas the original cocoon from which he was rejected could be referred to as culture "A".

The same must have occurred amongst the Kolis, and one of the sub-groups that resettled was that of the Son Kolis. The Son Kolis were none other than the Mahadev Kolis or the Raj Kolis who today are a hill tribe but until the last century were the great rulers of the famous kingdom of Javar (Thana District). As their population increased they started seeking new lands and crossing the Sahyadri and coming to the Konkan. Since fishing in various rivers and streams was a part of their original hunting-gathering economy, they adapted themselves to their surroundings and took to marine fishing.

They still refer to themselves as Kolis and most texts refer to the Kolis of the Konkan as synonymous to the fishing groups as noted earlier.

There are various accounts of both Indian and foreign travellers referring to the two important ports on the western coast of India, i.e. Ceul in Raigarh district and Sopara in Thana district, which carried out extensive trade with foreign nations. We also have large clusters of Son Koli settlements in and around these two places and also at minor ports like Bassein, Kalyan, Alibag, Dabhol etc.

So, when these scattered groups of Kolis reached the shore,

they came into interaction with the foreign traders. This must have resulted in offsprings of mixed blood. This relationship can be described as the default which led to many a thread of the cocoon of culture to snap. Thus the birth of culture B started. The characteristic feature of this culture B was very distinct -- "Distinguished physically from the other inhabitants by their light brown complexion, the round curves of their face, and their smiling expression, they are equally distinguished by their aristocratic constitution -- their separate dialect and their occupation. It is clear that they are the descendants of a people as widely distinguished on the one hand from the dark Agri, Maratha and Mahar castes who form a major part of the population, as on the other hand they are from the grey-eyed and pallid Konkanasthas who are its spiritual timocracy....." (Rothfield, 1911;278).

These were the Son Kolis or the golden people, who after their birth, or the date of settlement on the north Konkan coastline, kept themselves unusually unaffected either by moral, mental and physical ideals of the surrounding population.

Rothfield (1911:278) also propounds that "history is not clear as to their arrival on the coast but a probable inference from tradition is that the majority of the present Son Kolis are descended from immigrants from the hills, who arrived some four hundred years ago".

Similar view has been written by Sir John Campbell. He considered the Kolis and Bhils to have a common origin and form

the bulk of the population of the Bombay Presidency. But now they are confined only to hilly or jungle track. Sub-division took place amongst them due to change in occupations, and a certain admixture of foreign blood. Thus among Kolis some of the divisions are with names of Ahir, Bhil, Dhangar and Maratha. And intermarriage with Rajputs has in places produced mixed castes from both sources (Cambell, 1975 :xviii - xix).

These are echoed in the words of Edwards, (1902:6) when he wrote that "it was not by the path of the sea but from land ward that the earliest inhabitants of Bombay (viz. Kolis) journeyed. At some date prior to the year c.300 a.d. and prior perhaps to the Christian era... Admitting therefore that our earliest settlers were of Dravidian origin, it is quite possible that their title also was derived from a Dravidian source; a theory to some extent confused by the fact that at the season of later immigrations into Thana, the Kolis almost certainly held the plain country, and were as some of them still are a field worker".

I have taken the liberty of expounding the above mentioned hypothesis on the basis of one of the legends collected by Arthur Crawford about the Chitpawane brahmins (Crawford, 1909:31-38). This legend talks about how Parshurama conquered the Konkan strip from the sea, and for inhabiting this strip he asked Balarama to collect the Arab corpses strewn on the shore and gave them life. These were supposedly the ancestors of the Chitpawan brahmins. This legend is taken from the Sahayadrikhund.

Thus the 'golden people', with the passage of time, estab-

lished themselves. Due to their light coloured skin, tall graceful stature of the women, and light hair, these Son Kolis stood on the top-most rung in the hierarchy amongst the various Koli groups.

The Son Kolis were regarded till 1931 as one of the tribes of Bombay Presidency. After that they were given the distinction of a caste by the Government of India.

But as the years pass, the number of Son Kolis is diminishing. And today it is very difficult for one to prove that the Kolis inhabiting the coast are the Son Kolis. In fact, many of these Kolis questioned me as to what do I mean by 'Son Koli' and that there are no such people as the Son Kolis. This problem arose as a result of the non-inclusion of the Son kolis as one of the backward classes. Hence most of the Son Kolis get themselves registered as belonging to one of the sub-groups of Kolis which enjoy the benefit of being a backward class.

**SUB-DIVISION:** Gerson da Cunha (1900:40) talks of three or four sub-divisions of the Kolis of Bombay, the most prominent being the Dungari Kolis (named after the hills to the south of Mazagaon). They mainly follow the occupation of fishing and are sailors. They are considerably wealthy and wear a distinctive iron knife around their neck.

Edwards (1904:517) refers to the two sub-divisions of the Kolis of Bombay, namely, the dolkars and the sate. The term dolkar is derived according to him from dol, the commonly used conical or the funnel-shaped net. The dolkars are the ones who are actually involved in fishing while the sates purchase on

wholesale basis the fish from the boats and sell it to the retailers. This is true even to today. (Elaborated later while talking about the market system in Ch.VII).

Punekar (1959 : 16-17) names four sections of Son Kolis, viz. Thalkars, Gaonkars, Christian Kolis and Nava Kolis. The Thalkars are said to be immigrants from Thal in Alibag Taluka whereas the Gaonkars means "natives of that village". These Thalkars are of lighter skin tones and eye colour than Gaonkars.

The Christian Kolis are the Son Kolis who were converted to christianity mainly by the Portuguese missionaries. The number of Christian Kolis is more in Thana district and Bombay than in Raigarh district.

But the major part of these Christians are very little different from the Hindu Kolis. They follow all the customs and worship all the deities of the Hindu Kolis along with visiting the churches, and include the cross amongs their family deities. Streynsham Masters wrote in 1672 that many of these converted Christians understood very little of the Christian religion. They basically turned Christians, for being baptised by the Portuguese, they were entitled to a certain allowance of rice per month, and were also at times popularly referred to as 'Rice Christians'.

These Christians formed their own heirarchy and became a rigid sub-group among the Kolis only marrying within their kind.

A description of the village of Cavel in Bombay talks about it being originally the home exclusively of the Kolis "who were

converted by the Portuguese and attached to the Parish Church on the Esplanade with the adjoining cemetery which exists no more. In 1860 when I first visited Cavel, which seems to be a Portuguese rendering of Kolwar (a Koli Hamlet) it was the centre of the largest Roman Catholic community on the island (of Bombay) to which immigrants from Bassein, Salsette, Daman and Goa made continual yearly additions" (Da Cunha, 1900:7).

Thus Nava Kolis are a small group in Bombay who were reconverted from Christianity back into the fold of Hinduism but are still not accepted either by the Son (Hindu) Kolis or by the Christian Kolis.

Another mention of the sub-division among the Kolis of the coast is given as Cheulkars or Son Kolis and Rahtadkar Kolis. The Son Kolis are said to have come from Ceul in Kolaba some two hundred years ago, (almost three hundred years if we are to take the present date). The Rahtadkars are old settlers from Rahtad in Margoa. Rahtadkar can accept food from the Ceulkars but not the other way around (Gaz.Bom.Pres. XI :441).

Another group who are taken to be a stock of the 'Sea Kolis and other Kolis of Bombay' (Joshi,1909:574),but claim superiority to them, (the Kolis), are the Mangelas. They are said to have got their name from 'mag' (loom or net). At times they also refer to themselves as tandels or nakhwas. And these terms are none other than those used by Son Kolis to describe the boat owners and sailors respectively. Mangelas are found basically in Bombay and Thana district, and follow the calling of a fisherman. They

associate their name Mangela to the ships referred to as Mangeries which they owned. It could be that down the years there must have been a rift amongst the Son Kolis with those who owned the Mangeries. This is just a hypothesis.

Thus, we have tried to make a broad classification of the Son Koli sub-groups. And a conclusion has been reached that the Son Kolis are none other than the Mahadev Kolis or Hill Kolis who either due to expulsion or exploration or expansion, came to the coast. And as the sea was the ultimate limit, settled down on the coast as fishermen.

**PHYSICAL FEATURES:** The Son Kolis stand out different with their robust physique and a sturdy stature. Carrying, heaving and pulling nets and baskets and manning the boats, they have powerful and very well developed muscles of arms and shoulders. (an important thing to note here is that while the women carry their baskets on their head the menfolk always do it on their shoulders).

The Kolaba Gazetter (Mah.State Gaz.Kolaba Dist. :153-54) describes the fishermen and Kolis as "except a few hill Kolis, in the island part almost all are coastmen belonging to the tribe of Son Kolis, a larger boned and studier class than the hill or Mahadev Kolis ... Son Kolis are strongly made and may vary in colour from dark to light brown. The young women are healthy and fresh looking and some of them fair and handsome".

Walimbe (1977:91) opines that the Son Kolis were the only

sub-group of Kolis having all shades of skin, hair and eye colour. Mostly they are medium statured on an average. The percentage of very short or very tall people is less. The length and breadth of the head are 184.20 and 154.40 respectively. The face is comparatively broad and appears to be mesometopic (88.00%).

They are said to be 'the Dravidian or Negroite type, the form of the head usually inclines to be dolicocephalic, but the nose is thick and broad and the formula expressing its proportionate dimensions is higher than in any known race except the Negroes. The nasal index which is the best test of race distinction gives an average 82.0 while that of the brahmin is 70.4' (Da Cunha, 1900:530).

A very typical feature of the Son Kolis is their tendency to put on weight in their middle age. The male population normally develops a pot-belly while the women tend to do so on their buttocks. This could be due to fondness of drink, modernization and a much more relaxed lives. Punekar (1959;220) gives examples of the good health of the ancestors of the Son Kolis. Even today the peak of health can be observed in the height and strength of some of the older generations as one wanders around the Koliwadās. One example whom I came across at Borli was an eighty year old who is well over six feet tall, broad shouldered and still actively participates in fishing. Another example is of the father of the present Patil of Korlai who goes deep sea fishing even today. He is in his late sixties.

In general, the health of these people is on a decline. The



Son Kolis attribute it to polluted food, tensions, problems of fishing (competition with mechanisation, industrialisation, water pollution etc.) But on the whole they are honest and hard-working, with a kindly face, a happy smile and willingness to pay off their debts.

The men earlier used to tie their hair in a top knot (Gaz.Bom.Pres.XI :68) and keep moustache. They shaved their head once in a fortnight but today no evidence of this practice is visible. The youngsters wear their hair in the latest of fashions, mostly copied from some movie star. The women on the other hand are not that affected and are well groomed with oiled and tightly combed hair. The use of false hair is very common as are the decorations of flowers.

LANGUAGE: The Arab writers of the tenth and eleventh centuries made mention of the natives of Konkan speaking a particular dialect known as Ladavi, i.e. a dialect of Lar (the country between Broach and Ceul). This could have been Gujrati, the trade language of the coastal towns (Mah.State Gaz.Thana Dist. :249).

But it was only in 1659 that a Jesuist priest Francisco Vaz de Guimaraco, wrote in the Koli dialect a Christi Purana, a Metrical Life of Christ (Ibid). Koli bhasha or Koli dialect is the language that is spoken by the Son Kolis. It is described as a sub-dialect of the 'Konkan standard' dialect of Marathi (Grierson, 1967 : 61). It is only a spoken dialect and has similarities in the phonological, morphological and syntactical

features with standard Marathi.

The difference between the spoken Marathi and Koli bhasha is mainly due to incorrect pronunciation, variations in inflectional forms and the use of peculiar words. Under the first we have the substitution of d, dh and by r; as and n as n. The promiscuous use of aspirates instead of unaspirates and vice versa, the addition of an n sound, and the separation of conjunct consonants. Inflectional terminations differ slightly from those of the Deccan Marathi, the crude form of the word being subject to less changes of the words not in use in Deccan (Singer, 1955:32).

Thus the fact that today the Kolibhasha is the language of only the Son Kolis and that a book on the life of Christ was written in this language indicates that 'this race was the first, and for a long time the most numerous on the island (Da, Cunha, 1900).

**DRESS AND ORNAMENTS:** The dress of the Koli women is a sari which leaves the head bare and tightly drawn between the legs. The end of the sari is drawn over the right shoulder and tucked in the front into the waist band. This gives free movement to the women while working. The upper part of the body is covered by a bodice. Earlier the unmarried girls only used to wear the sari below the waist not covering their breast and shoulder. This was done only after marriage. A very distinctive feature of the Koli women dress is the 'phadki' or the gaily printed white shawl which they always wear around their shoulders when they step out of their houses. This distinguishes them from the other ethnic

groups of the Konkan.

Today, the 'gol' sari, or the six yard sari wrapped around is becoming more popular with the young kolins who are not actively involved with fishing. In fact, many of them even feel 'shy' to wear their traditional dress. The young girls roam around in a shirt worn over a long petticoat.

The men on the other hand wear a rough jacket and 'roomal' (handkerchief) while working or relaxing. This handkerchief is a gaily painted cloth which comes from Madras. This cloth is folded into a triangle, and the two ends are tied around the waist and the other end is taken between the legs and tied behind with the other ends. This leaves the legs bare and allows free movement while fishing. Today the jacket is substituted by a singlet or a bushirt and the younger generation prefer the shorts to the 'roomaal'.

As regards ornaments, the Son Kolis are known for their love of jewellery, especially gold. But no jewellery is worn below the waist. Anklets are worn neither by men nor by women. On the right hand women wear a heavy silver bracelet of a particular shape. This is worn on the marriage day when the woman breaks her glass bangles and gives it to the sea. It symbolises the faith of the kolin in the sea goddess who is thus prevailed upon to take care of the kolins husband from the perils of the sea. This silver bracelet is known as vale. No other ornament is worn on that hand. But this practice is also now falling into disuse.

They also have no system of tattoo. Otherwise the Koli women



Fig. 6.1



Fig. 6.2.

is loaded with jewellery and this can be best noticed during the months of April and May which are the only months when the Son Kolis can get married. The men wear a very particular knife in a thread round their neck. This iron knife is used mainly for repairing nets, cutting themselves free from problematic situations when at sea. It is a very necessary part of their life. And it has been described thus: 'the claim of long descent can only be made by the Koli aristocrat, who has not forgotten his ancestral rights; carrying round his neck as an insignia of his tribe a curious iron knife, manufactured by himself, the emblem of his autochthonous power, which symbolises both his patrician descent and his ancient away over the Island....' (Da Cunha, 1900:9).

The Kolis also have a head gear. It is a red hat with a semi-circular scallop in the front. This is prevalent only amongst the Kolis of Thana, Mandir, Versova and Mudh Revdanda Kolis wear flatter hats and Pan Kolis wear turbans. When worn this falls into a shape that resembles an outstretched hood of a cobra. This could denote the connection of the Son Kolis with a Nagvanshi stock (Edwards, 1904:52), or it could be that the Kolis were some how connected to a snake worshipping ethnic group, e.g. the sheshkuls who have been referred to by Makintosh while talking of the Mahadev Kolis (1836).

Today the origin and explanation of this head gear is lost and mostly the Kolis go bare headed or wearing modern caps while fishing.

KOLI DANCE: Music and dance are an expressive form of





Fig. 6.3

communication prevalent in all societies the world over. It is culturally patterned and differs from one ethnic group to another. So is the case with the Son Kolis. Dance has been described as an ambivalent relation between man and nature - wherein man took in the colours from nature while he allies himself to the elements around him (Anand, 1959:2). Here it is the motion of the darya (sea). Thus it is an unconscious stimulation of the movement of the sea that is very much noticed in the rhythmic swaying of the body to the rippling tunes accompanying them. These movements of pleasure and utter abandonment not only aligns Koli as one with nature but also lifts him from the monotony of hard work and labour (Fig.6.3).

'Kolyacha nach' as it is popularly known all over India is very typical of the Son Kolis and is restricted mainly to the Konkan sea coast. The intricate movement of the dance has been described in detail. The left hand is placed on the hip while the right hand is held up and is swayed in accordance with the music. The dancers who form either two rows or a circle, consists of both males and females. During Gauri (August - September) and during marriages the dances are performed mainly by women. But what is most noteworthy is that it is a team work and 'with the miniature cars in their hands they (the Kolis) imitate the rowing of a boat, now in full swing, now in lull with their bodies swaying backwards and forward in full unison, they create a plastic picture of a boat tossing on the waves of the sea' (Agarkar, 1950:58).

A banjo forms an essential part of their dance band. They

accompany the traditional 'vajantris' (musicians).

SON KOLI SETTLEMENTS: Study of settlement pattern is very important in pre-historic and historic studies as it reflects the variety of institutions prevalent in a culture. Chang (1972) used the terms 'microstructure' and 'macrostructure' to describe socio-cultural systems of individual settlement, and those made up of a number of settlements. When we study the Koli settlement we have to study it at both levels. The placement of the Koliwada (Koli village) forms a settlement, and thus falls in the bracket of micro structure whereas the whole village including the settlement of the other groups viz. Agris, Bhandaris, Christians, Muslims, Brahmins, kothkaris etc. forms a macrostructure. Thus we shall consider a Koli Settlement of Korlai within the macrostructure of this area.

The Koliwada like most others is situated on the coast at the mouth of Kundalika river and outside the walls of the ancient fort. This settlement overlooks the sea. The houses are arranged in neat rows and in tiers a few feet away from the water line.

The arrangement of the village continues with the houses of the Bhandaris being alongside with the Kolis. They being the toddy tappers are placed close to the coconut groves. Houses belonging to the Agris form a separate block while those of the Christians are situated a kilometre away. The Katkari settlement lies hidden on the slopes of the Sahyadri as they rely mainly on forest produce. Thus mostly the segmentation is in an arrangement of lanes or blocks, but in larger settlements like Revdanda it is



not very defined and the lanes in a way encroach on one another's area. Thus at Revdanda the Koli and the Musalman settlements are intermixed. This was on a macrolevel.

Coming down to the microlevel, the Koli houses are placed in a linear arrangement with the houses having entrances to the lanes rather than to the beach. Every house has a courtyard in the back where there is a special enclosure for women to have their bath. It is in the courtyard or the 'oti' that most of the activities of the Son-Kolis are carried out.

While laying out the foundation of the house vasti shanti is performed. Vasti shanti or the 'hom' performed while laying the foundation of any house amongst the Son Kolis whenever a new house is being built, a hole is made in the ground and they place the statue of sesa naag (he is considered sacred as he is supposed to support the world on his hood) made of five metals along with eighteen types of grain. This purifies the whole house and prevents any evil spirit's influence on the house and the inmates.

The houses are built on a square raised plinth. They are made of stone blocks and mud and the final plastering is done of cow dung. The sloping roofs from the central beam has a wide enough expanse and the house is divided into compartments, one behind, and the other in the front. These houses are mostly one storeyed. On the ground floor there is the hall, a room, a devghar (God's house) and a kitchen. A flight of wooden stairs leads one up to the next floor which is made of wooden planks. This floor is mainly used as a store room.

The nets, baskets, fishing implements, huge jars (rajanas) for storage of grains. Sukat (dried fish) are all hung and stored here. It is a heaven for rats and cats.

A Koli house has two hearths - one in the kitchen and the other outside in the courtyard. Most of the Kolis in Alibag and Murud district do not allow any non-vegetarian food inside their house except for fish and eggs. Thus if non-vegetarian food has to be cooked during festival days or even otherwise, it is done so on the hearth out in the courtyard. One is supposed to eat meat outside, have a bath and then enter the house. This could suggest a trait of vegetarianism that could have existed amongst these people at one time. The reason given by them is that "our gods are in the house, and we can't go to them if we have eaten meat and not had a bath".

But this practice is slowly dying out. There is another purpose of the hearth in the courtyard. The kolin could keep an eye on the fish that are put there for drying and do her cooking too.

As we said earlier, the entrance to the houses are not from the beach, but in the lane. This prevents the house from facing the direct force of a gale or strong wind. At the entrance is a small portico where are lined the photographs of beloved relatives, gods, goddesses and saints.

Now-a-days the houses are taking a new shape. To avoid the plastering of the walls with cow-dung every week and during

festival days, the Kolis are opting for tiles and cement. But this does not agree with the presence of cats and ducks and hen and dogs of whom the Son Kolis are so fond of keeping. And on the whole the clean houses are getting more and more dirty.

Thus the number of rooms vary in accordance to the status of the owner. Air conditioners, televisions and videos have become the sign of status though fishing continues as a tradition. Another symbol of wealth is the building of toilets and establishing of tube-wells. The rest of the people go to the village well for getting drinking water and washing clothes. Separate areas allotted to men and women on the outskirts of the Koliwada to be used for toilet facilities.

Thus in contrast to the other groups around them, and their contemporaries in Gujrat, the Son Kolis have kept themselves unusually unaffected. They have in some ways preserved their earlier ways, though they have no answers to the 'whys' of following those traditions. After considering in brief the general features of the Son Kolis we shall now discuss in detail their economy and religion in the next two chapters.

#### NOTES

(a) pg. 381 is taken from the library of Deccan College, Pune and its title page with author's name is missing. It is entitled 'Bombay - Early History' acc.no. is 92559; call.no. V231:3:M. ?.

(b) In spite of efforts this purana could not be traced.

(c) Sherring refers to the Raj Kolis as springing from the Mahadev Kolis but being expelled by them for some offence

and forming an entirely separate group from the parent tribe.

(d) The Sahyadri Khind is the only text that talks about the origin of the Chitpavans as from an arab ancestry. During the Peshwa rule it was regarded as a first degree crime even to possess this text or even to read it.