

MIGRANT SHEPHERDS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ANIMAL HUSBANDRY IN KONKAN

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 15th Dec 2025 Accepted: 19th Dec 2025 Published: 20th Dec 2025	This study examines the traditional seasonal migration of shepherd families in Western Maharashtra, focusing on an estimated 200 to 250 families from Khandala taluka who travel annually to the Konkan region in search of suitable grazing lands. This movement is essential for the economic survival of these households and the health of their livestock. The research investigated the socio-economic conditions, pastoral practices, and challenges faced by a sample of 30 migrant shepherd families. Data was gathered using interviews, observations, and discussions with local experts. The findings show that migrant shepherds contribute significantly to Konkan's animal husbandry sector by maintaining indigenous sheep and goat breeds, improving soil fertility through manure deposition, and supplying livestock products to rural markets. However, they also encounter numerous challenges, including shrinking grazing lands, restrictions imposed by forest departments, limited access to veterinary services, climate-related uncertainties, and social exclusion during migration. Despite these difficulties, migratory pastoralism continues to provide livelihood security and supports sustainable livestock management in the region. The study highlights the need for stronger policy support, improved veterinary outreach, and recognition of pastoral mobility as an integral part of rural development in Konkan.
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INTRODUCTION

Pastoralism has been a traditional livelihood practice in many regions of India, particularly among communities that depend on seasonal mobility of livestock. In Maharashtra, shepherd families from the semi-arid Deccan plateau migrate every year to the Konkan region, which offers abundant post-monsoon grazing resources. This seasonal movement is essential for maintaining the health of livestock and ensuring the economic survival of pastoral households. From Khandala taluka, an estimated 200 to 250 shepherd families migrate annually with their flocks toward Konkan, following established grazing routes and seasonal patterns that have been practiced for generations. The Konkan region, known for its high rainfall, forested terrain, and rich natural fodder, provides favourable conditions for pastoral activities during the dry months. Migrant shepherds contribute to the rural economy through natural grazing-based livestock rearing, supply of sheep and goat products, and manure that enriches agricultural soils. Their indigenous knowledge of animal care, grazing management, and breeding holds significant value for sustainable animal husbandry.

However, pastoral migration is increasingly challenged by modern developments. Migrant shepherds often face problems such as declining common grazing lands, conflict with forest regulations, difficulty in accessing veterinary care, risk of livestock diseases, and social marginalization. Changing land-use patterns, urbanization, and climatic variations further threaten their traditional routes and livelihood stability. Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on 30 migrant shepherd families from Khandala taluka to understand their migration patterns, socio-economic conditions, challenges, and contributions to animal husbandry in Konkan. By analysing their experiences, the study aims to highlight opportunities for strengthening pastoral systems and to propose measures for integrating migratory livestock practices into sustainable rural development strategies.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze the seasonal migration patterns of Dhangar shepherds to the Konkan region, specifically examining the socio-economic and ecological impact of their grazing practices on the local environment and agricultural economy.
2. To investigate the primary challenges faced by the migrant Dhangar communities in the Konkan region, and to identify and propose policy and practical recommendations for improving sustainable animal husbandry and supporting their livelihoods.

METHODOLOGY

1. Desk Review & Literature Survey

A comprehensive review of existing information was conducted, including government reports, livestock census data, research papers, and policy documents. This provided the foundational context on migration patterns, grazing systems, socio-economic conditions, and pre-existing challenges faced by pastoral communities in Konkan.

2. Field-Based Primary Research

A. Direct Observation: The researcher conducted visits to selected villages and common grazing routes in Konkan. Direct observations were made regarding seasonal movement, flock management practices, availability of grazing land and water, and interactions with the local environment. This helped identify real-world issues such as land disputes and resource scarcity.

B. Qualitative Interviews: Detailed, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including migrant Dhangar shepherds, local farmers, veterinarians, and Gram Panchayat officials. These interviews gathered in-depth data on livelihood practices, dependence on livestock, social challenges, administrative issues, and access to veterinary support during migration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Context and Economic Role: Shepherds, mainly Dhangar communities from arid inland districts, migrate to the Konkan region (October–May) for seasonal grazing, utilizing the area's abundant rainfall and natural fodder. This practice is critical for the rural economy, as it enhances soil fertility via animal manure and sustains the livestock sector by providing meat, wool, and genetic diversity (e.g., Deccani sheep).

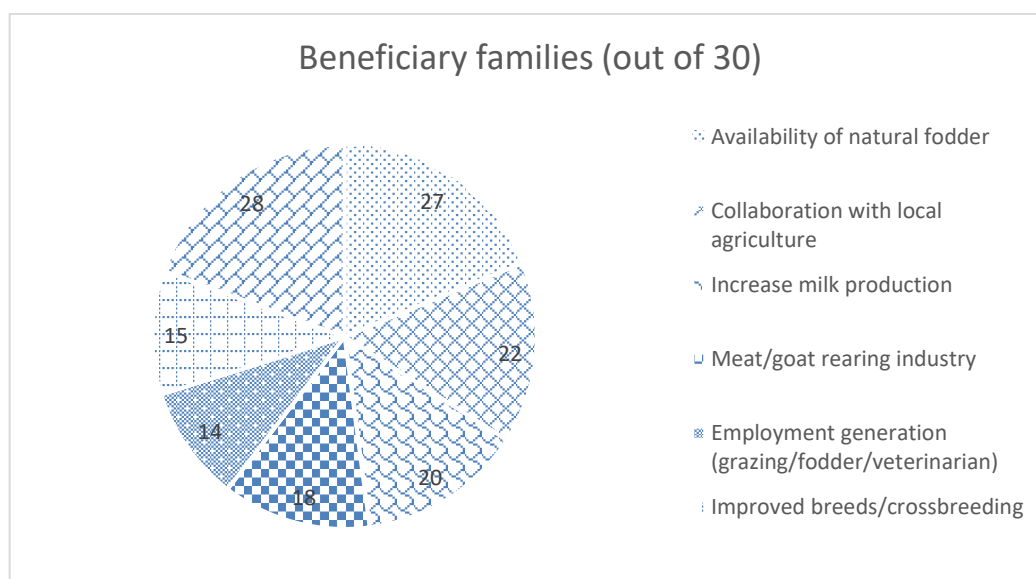
Challenges and Opportunity: This traditional, eco-friendly livelihood is facing severe pressure from urbanization, loss of open grazing routes, land disputes, and restrictive forest policies. Despite these challenges, Konkan offers a strong opportunity to develop sustainable animal husbandry, supporting local employment and growth in the dairy and meat processing industries.

TABLE 1

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRANT FAMILIES

Type of opportunity	Beneficiary families (out of 30)	Impact (%)
Availability of natural fodder	27	90
Collaboration with local agriculture	22	73
Increase milk production	20	67
Meat/goat rearing industry	18	60
Employment generation (grazing/fodder/veterinarian)	14	47
Improved breeds/crossbreeding	15	50
Eco-friendly/sustainable livelihoods	28	93

Source: Primary data collected via Field Research (2024-25).



1. Availability of Natural Fodder (90% Impact)

This is the most widely accessed opportunity after eco-friendly livelihoods. 27 out of 30 families benefit from natural fodder availability, indicating that the region has strong natural resources that support livestock rearing and reduce fodder costs.

2. Eco-friendly / Sustainable Livelihoods (93% Impact)

This has the highest impact (93%), with 28 families benefiting. It shows that sustainable practices are well adopted and provide significant support to the community, possibly through grazing management, conservation, or low-impact livelihood methods.

3. Collaboration with Local Agriculture (73% Impact)

22 families benefit from cooperation with agriculture, such as accessing crop residues, shared land use, or integrated farming systems. This indicates good coordination between livestock rearing and farming activities.

4. Increase in Milk Production (67% Impact)

20 families report increased milk production. This reflects improvements in feeding, breed quality, or animal health services, which enhance dairy income.

5. Meat/Goat Rearing Industry (60% Impact)

18 families benefit from goat/meat production activities. This suggests that small ruminant rearing is an important secondary source of income for many households.

6. Improved Breeds / Crossbreeding (50% Impact)

15 families have adopted improved or crossbred animals. Although the impact is moderate, it shows a gradual shift toward more productive breeds to boost livestock performance.

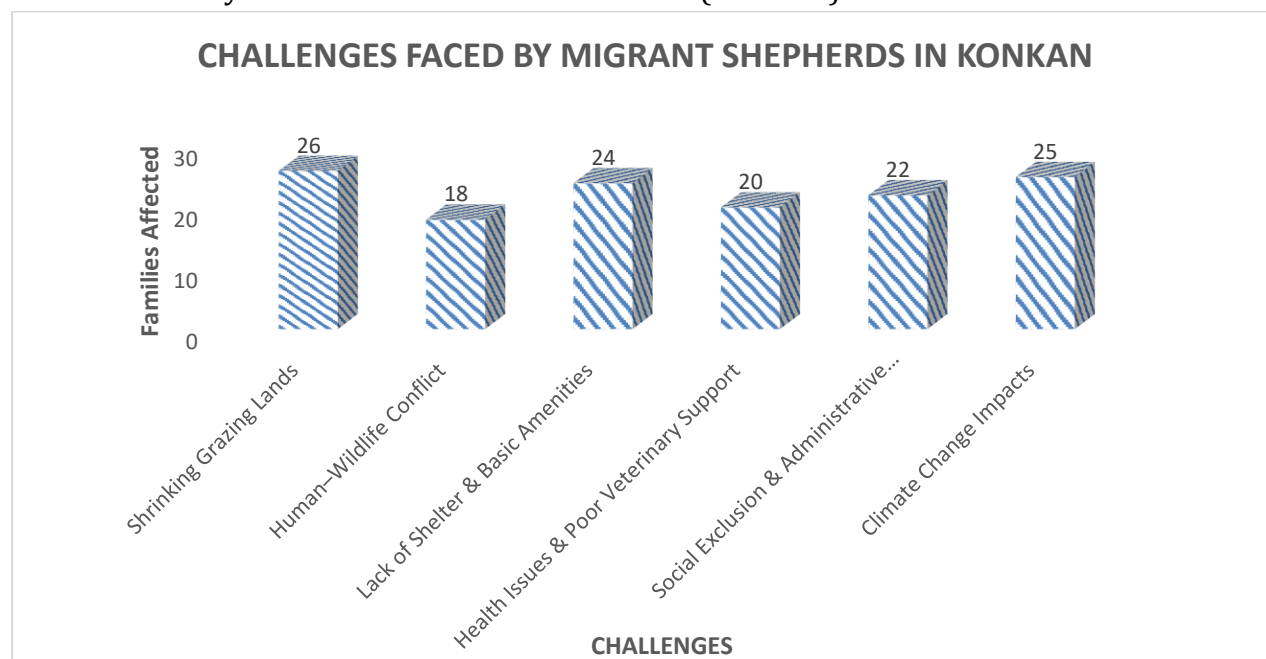
7. Employment Generation (47% Impact)

14 families gained employment through activities such as grazing support, fodder collection, or veterinary services. This is the lowest impact area, indicating limited job creation compared to other opportunities.

TABLE 2
CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT SHEPHERDS IN KONKAN

Sr. No.	Type of Challenge	Description	Families Affected (out of 30)	Impact (%)
1	Shrinking Grazing Lands	Urbanization, cashew-mango plantations, forest restrictions reduce grazing routes; longer, expensive migration	26	87
2	Human-Wildlife Conflict	Livestock attacks by leopards, wild dogs, snakes during forest grazing	18	60
3	Lack of Shelter & Basic Amenities	No safe water, toilets, fodder storage, weather protection at temporary camps	24	80
4	Health Issues & Poor Veterinary Support	Limited vaccination, diseases like PPR/FMD, difficulty getting emergency care	20	67
5	Social Exclusion & Administrative Barriers	Lack of grazing permits, IDs, scheme awareness, and poor market access	22	73
6	Climate Change Impacts	Irregular monsoons, fodder scarcity, water shortage, migration delays	25	83

Source: Primary data collected via Field Research (2024-25).



Challenges and Contributions of Migrant Dhangar Shepherds in Konkan

The migrant Dhangar shepherd community in the Konkan region faces significant and interconnected challenges that threaten the viability of their traditional livelihood. Primary obstacles include the shrinking of essential grazing lands due to urban expansion, commercial plantations (cashew-mango), and forest regulations, forcing shepherds to undertake longer, costlier migrations. This environmental pressure is compounded by climate change impacts, specifically irregular rainfall and resulting fodder/water scarcity, which makes their work highly uncertain. Furthermore, they suffer from human-wildlife conflict (leopard/wild dog attacks), inadequate veterinary support leading to livestock disease outbreaks (PPR, FMD), and a severe lack of basic facilities (safe shelter, sanitation, drinking water) at temporary camps. Socially and administratively, they experience marginalization due to difficulties in obtaining grazing permits, ID documents, and access to government welfare schemes and formal markets. Despite these adversities, the shepherds provide a substantial socio-economic contribution, acting as a crucial element in the agricultural-livestock symbiosis through the supply of organic manure, meat, and dairy, while preserving vital indigenous pastoral knowledge and maintaining the ecological balance of grazing ecosystems.

Recommendations for Sustainable Pastoralism in Konkan

To ensure the sustainability of migrant shepherding in Konkan and mitigate the challenges faced by the Dhangar community, a multi-pronged policy approach is recommended. This includes the immediate demarcation of Designated Grazing Corridors by government and forest agencies to minimize land conflicts and ensure safe seasonal transit. Mobile Veterinary Clinics must be established along these routes to provide essential services like vaccination and emergency care, complemented by the creation of Fodder Banks in villages to reduce reliance on fragile forest ecosystems during scarcity. To improve living conditions, Temporary Shelter Zones equipped with basic amenities (water, sanitation) should be provided at key camping spots. Furthermore, administrative support is critical, requiring the issuance of Seasonal Migration IDs and Grazing Permits to prevent legal harassment and promote Market Linkages through livestock cooperatives. Finally, building resilience requires Climate-Smart Pastoralism strategies, including water harvesting and promoting drought-tolerant fodder, alongside Training Programs focused on scientific animal husbandry and disease prevention.

Conclusion

The seasonal migration of Dhangar shepherd families from the semi-arid Deccan plateau (specifically Khandala taluka) to the Konkan region represents a vital and ecologically sustainable traditional livelihood system, with approximately 200 to 250 families migrating annually. The study of a sample of 30 families confirms that migrant shepherds play a crucial role in the Konkan's animal husbandry sector by maintaining indigenous sheep and goat breeds and enriching soil fertility through manure deposition, thereby supporting the rural economy. However, this mobility is facing critical challenges, primarily shrinking grazing lands due to urbanization and forest restrictions (87% impact), compounded by the impacts of climate change (83% impact) and lack of

basic amenities (80% impact). To preserve this system and enhance their contribution to sustainable livestock management, the study strongly recommends strengthening institutional support through the provision of Mobile Veterinary Clinics, Designated Grazing Corridors, and formal recognition of pastoral mobility through Seasonal Migration IDs and permits. Supporting these traditional practices is essential for balanced rural development and preserving the region's cultural and ecological heritage.

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