



GRA | Group for Rural Activities

Gulsunde Camp Report

7th March - 8th March 2026



Group for Rural Activities,
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay
Powai, Mumbai - 400 076.

March 2026

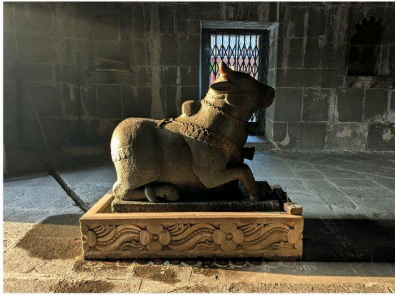
Objective of the camp:

- **To Gain Firsthand Insight into Rural Socio-Economics:** To interact directly with the tribal residents of a Gulsunde village to understand their daily challenges, particularly regarding livelihoods and income.
- **To analyse the Impact of Woman-Led Initiatives:** To understand the process by which female participation in the labour force has improved in a traditional male-dominated landscape.
- **To experience the authentic rural life in tribal hamlets:** To make students realise and experience the limited resource availability in rural hamlets, alongside creating awareness of the ground reality of tribal people, their culture, traditions, and their evolution with time.
- **To explore the natural and historical importance of Gulsunde village and the Karnala Bird Sanctuary.** To observe and immerse students in the natural, architectural and historical significance of Karnala Fort and adjoining Bird Sanctuary.

About Gulsunde village:

Nestled in the Panvel Taluka of Raigad district, Maharashtra, Gulsunde is a tranquil village characterised by a community-oriented lifestyle with approximately 374 families residing there. This layout follows the traditional pattern of the North Konkan region, where settlements centre on shared community resources and revered local landmarks, such as the ancient Shri Siddheshwar Devasthan (Gulsunde Shiva Temple) near the Patalganga river.

Despite its serene, laid-back atmosphere, the village is increasingly well-connected; it lies roughly 16 km from Panvel and is accessible from Mumbai (about 55 km away) via the Mumbai-Pune Expressway or the scenic Danda-Apta road. Its proximity to the industrial and educational hub of Rasayani offers a unique blend of rustic charm and modern accessibility.



Gulsunde

Demographics:

According to the 2011 Census of India, Gulsunde village maintains a balanced population structure with a total of 1,588 residents comprising 839 males and 749 females across 374 households. The community exhibits a strong literacy rate of 81.95%, with male literacy at 89.28% and female literacy at 73.72%. The village's social composition includes significant representation from Scheduled Tribes at 14.92% (237 people) and Scheduled Castes at 11.65% (185 people), while the average sex ratio stands at 893 females per 1,000 males.

About Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram

The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was founded in 1952 by Ramakant Keshav “Balasaheb” Deshpande, an official in the Odisha State Department of Tribal Welfare, with support from the State Government. Since its inception, the main aim of this organisation has been the integral development of tribal people, livelihood generation, and the facilitation of education, as well as the reinvigoration of Indigenous cultural and historical heritage among them across India. The organisation manages its entire development agenda, primarily through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funding and donations. In fact, the Foundation has played a key role so far in providing financial support to various projects across India.



Ramakant Keshav “Balasaheb” Deshpande (Founder of VKA)

According to the organisation, it is currently running 22,000 projects in India. Some of its important initiatives are

- 1) Ekal Vidyalaya - This initiative aims to provide basic education to tribal children in their villages, in very remote locations where school access is limited. Here, the volunteers go to those places and teach lessons for 1st-4th grade.
- 2) Chatravasa Nirman - Then the organisation focuses deeply on creating suitable living spaces and affordable education for every aspiring tribal student. In Kharger, they operate a hostel for people pursuing higher education. Similarly, in Mandgaon, they run a fully residential school (Maharashtra government-recognised) for tribal students.
- 3) Gram Arogya Rakshak Yojana - This scheme aims to provide basic medical facilities to tribal villagers. An arogya rakshak is a young man/woman who is more educated than the rest of the rural village. He is given a first-aid kit and training for the people living in the village. He also serves as a go-to person in the village, conducting Shraddha Jagran, gram vikas, and khel-kud activities. Currently, 866 Arogya Rakhshaks are operating in the Paschim Maharashtra prant.
- 4) Cultural and historical reinvigoration - This organisation also aims to raise students' awareness of tribal history, culture, and traditions. It aims to make students aware of the legacy and struggles of forgotten tribal freedom fighters, such as Nagya Katkari, who was inspired by the "Namak Satyagraha" idea and called for "Jungle Satyagraha" against the brutal rule of british against tribal people and their right to the forest products in the name of conservation of forests.

Plan of Action:

Day 1: Arrival and Field Immersion

- **Departure:** Early morning (5.30 AM) departure from the IIT Bombay campus.
- **Arrival:** Arrival at ancient Shri Siddheshwar Devasthan (Gulsunde Shiva Temple), followed by Gulsunde village.

- **Orientation:** Camp briefing and introduction.
- **Community Dialogue:** Interactive session with Women volunteers and village elderly in the Women's Day celebration.
- **Departure to the camp site:** Living with villagers for a night in each hamlet and interacting with them about their living conditions, livelihoods, priorities, etc.

Day 2: Final Reflections, Karnala fort and bird sanctuary visit and Departure

- **Reflective Session:** Group discussion and final feedback with Dhananjoy Sir and Sucheta mam.
- **Conclusion:** Delivering a Vote of Thanks to Sir and Ma'am.
- **Karnala bird sanctuary and fort visit:** To immerse Students in the natural and historical heritage of Karnala.
- **Departure:** Departing from Karnala for the return journey to IIT Bombay.



Our Host, Mr Dhananjoy sir, and Mrs Sucheta mam

Day 1 (7th March):

Commencing the camp:

A multidisciplinary group of 29 students from IIT Bombay embarked on a two-day rural immersion camp in Gulsunde. Departing the campus at 5.30 AM, we reached the village at 8.30 AM after a 3-hour journey. We were warmly received by our host, Sir, who conducted an essential orientation and briefing session. This introduction provided us with critical insights into the unique geographical and ecological landscape while outlining the strategic objectives for our two-day field study.



Our Group of fellow campers on the bank of the river Patalganga in front of the ancient Shri Siddheshwar Devasthan (Gulsunde Shiva Temple)

Discussion with women volunteers and Villagers:

1. Socio-Economic Dynamics and the Challenges

The session began with a discussion with representatives of the organisation and several women from nearby hamlets. The discussion ranged from migration, health care, and sanitation to education, livelihoods, and the importance of women's safety. After that, we participated in the women's day celebration. In this session, the women of the villages actively participated and were made aware of reproductive health, safety, pregnancy, the importance of education, and a wide range of topics. After it ended, students made their way to their designated hamlets, where they were supposed to spend the night with fellow villagers.

2. Experiences with villagers

Students were assigned to groups of 2 or 3 and sent to 7 different tribal hamlets. Each group had its own experience and observation to share. We have incorporated the observations of two of them as they are. We will discuss our collective reflections and possible explanations of all at the end.

Dongarwadi- (Pratyush, Praveen, Sonam)

This hamlet consists of approx.30-40 houses. Most of the household members depend on agriculture. Besides agriculture, some of them are engaged in the brick-clay industry and house construction. They are mostly dependent on rice cultivation, and their agriculture is totally monsoon-dependent. Their cultivation peaks from June to October (Kharif Season). From January to June, they generally grow lima beans and pulses (requiring less water). The host of them was also one of them. These people were not the original inhabitants of this area. They migrated from the hillside area to the lower lands in 2003 due to a lack of basic educational, medical, and living facilities. Now, at least, they can avail of some facilities like medical and schools nearby, but as they live in an allegedly disputed area (though the host showed the land documents),

many schemes of the central and state governments don't apply to them. They don't have a piped water connection to their homes, and the household's female member fetches water from a central facility every day. This facility was installed by the panchayat after many requests.

The educational landscape for both males and females was not found encouraging; particularly for females, it is worse. From the interaction with the ladies, it was also noticed that underage marriages are also a common phenomenon there. The host's daughter left school after 9th grade and didn't seem keen to return. Though it should not be generalised, as we saw one exception, where the father proudly showed his daughter's 12th marksheet and said that she is preparing for govt services along with her studies. While interacting with the host, we found him to be in a state of utter helplessness. He said that despite repeated requests for an electricity connection and basic facilities, the administration showed little eagerness to address the issue. For electricity, they depend on hooking up to nearby connections (illegally). They are also afraid that, after the industry is built up (an industry is being constructed there), they would lose that too. While discussing education, he was more interested in his son's education to secure his future. Another important aspect of the conversation was that they don't see any significant value in investing in education. The host narrated an incident in which he said that in their own hamlet, one or two person completed their diploma and are still unemployed despite a lot of money being spent. Another issue was corruption: for any small job, they allegedly have to pay 4-5 lakh to the concerned officials. Though his claim could not be verified, it still raises a serious question about the administration's efficiency in that area.

Another irony was that nearly every house had TVs, but a proper bathroom or toilet was hard to find. Open defecation is the norm there, and we found only 1 functional toilet in our view. Besides, People (mostly men) are very enthusiastic about cricket. From a child to a grown man, everyone has a passion for cricket, and cricket tournaments were very common there; some of the fellow campers were also invited to one such tournament. The people there can be categorised as poor to middle-class. For primary education, we saw one Anganwadi. According to one villager, 20-40 students study there, and the building was built by the villagers with their own donations. There are 2 teachers appointed by the government. Two makeshift toilets were reserved for the teachers only, and one piped water supply was available only for

children. Despite limited resources, the hospitality was really lovely, and the host and his whole family were very generous and friendly.



Some glimpses from Dongarwadi

Mazgaon (Ajeesh, Mythili, Samridh)

The Warli tribal hamlet, situated in a hilly area, is connected to the main road by a concrete stretch of approximately 0.5 km. While the hamlet is physically accessible, it remains socially and economically isolated from mainstream development.

The factory located near the main road was not very interested in employing local community members. During interactions with residents, it was

understood that migrant workers from northern states and Nepal are preferred because they are willing to work longer hours—up to 12 hours a day—for lower wages. In contrast, local residents seek fair wages and standard 8-hour working conditions, which often leads to their exclusion. It was also noted that, although Maharashtra laws mandate a minimum local employment requirement, these provisions are frequently circumvented through informal means.

Sanitation emerged as a significant concern. Open defecation was commonly observed, particularly among men. Although residents mentioned a common toilet facility, it appeared to be either reserved, nonfunctional, or insufficient, and they hesitated to discuss or show it. Despite these challenges, the community made sincere efforts to arrange toilet facilities during the stay, although these arrangements were not entirely adequate.

The stay with a host family provided deeper insight into the community's way of life. The head of the family is involved in event management and painting, while his wife and daughter actively teach Warli art, their traditional wall painting form, to children in the hamlet. The daughter is currently in 11th standard, while the son, having completed 12th standard, has discontinued his studies and is now seeking employment, including the possibility of working at the nearby factory once he turns 18.

Conversations with elder members revealed that the community's traditional livelihood revolves around the collection and sale of forest resources. While this continues, it is seasonal in nature, leading many to take up daily wage labour, especially agricultural work on land owned by others outside the hamlet. The community itself does not own agricultural land, and agriculture is not traditionally part of its cultural practices. However, small-scale goat and poultry rearing, mainly for eggs, is commonly practised.

Despite limited infrastructure and basic amenities, the community's hospitality stood out. There was a genuine effort to ensure comfort, and simple yet flavorful Maharashtrian meals were served. During the visit, an amateur cricket tournament was taking place nearby. The host family warmly encouraged participation and facilitated interactions with local leaders. At the event, there was an unexpected and heartwarming gesture: the organisers

invited participants on stage, announced names over the loudspeaker, and honoured the visitors with shawls and mementoes. This experience added a memorable and meaningful dimension to the visit.



Some glimpses from Mazgaon

We are providing key observations from other campers' experiences, as many overlapped, and in the collective reflections, we will discuss them further. In Lohapwadi (Veeresh, Vishal, Ayushi), Arushi observed during her stay that those people are not very concerned about pollution or the side effects of throwing garbage into river systems, and it disturbed her when they said they would throw that garbage into the river itself. While discussing with the hosts, we also discussed this, and we got to know that despite awareness programmes, they don't obey or listen to them carefully because they couldn't

relate those hazardous side effects to their daily lives, and the waste disposal system is not in a very good state, despite being in such a Industrialized area. All the campers there faced problems with open defecation; they had to go to an industry to freshen up, and they had to make multiple requests with security to make this happen. They also experienced the acute prevalence of drinking among those people. The most saddening effect was to see a 12-year-old who had left his school and was addicted to smoking and drinking at this tender age. Another important point is the high screen time among the children there and its impact on their studies. When Pratyush asked some small kids at the host's house to tell a story, they preferred television and phones to listening to a story. In Washivali (Archishman and Surbhi), Archisman also observed the ill effects of drinking while driving on the national highway at night. Survi observed the struggle of a female volunteer in her family, particularly with her husband, due to her social work. He was visibly angry and upset as he had problems with food, all due to the demanding nature of work. On the other side, Survi saw a ray of hope in her as she was full of energy and determined to work for the betterment of society and her people despite all those challenges. These sounded ironic to her as she observed the women's day celebration that day, and at night, she saw the reality of it in society. Another point she discussed was that she was very enthusiastic about her daughter's education, unlike others in that area. Ambekar (Yogesh, Ankur, and Tanishq) also saw those challenges in their society, such as acute alcoholism. Anukur had a different observation: he did not find the children addicted to phones; they were studying. In Shivnagar (Vivek, Jay, and Arnav), they created a joyful environment by organising a small art competition among some kids, who were very enthusiastic about it. After all, that showed that the picture wasn't that grim. There is always hope and aspiration to improve.

3. Collective reflections and possible explanations

We will discuss here some of the important problems associated with those areas and provide possible explanations for this phenomenon. At last, we will provide some ways to solve the problems.

- 1) Lack of education - A general lack of education can be ascribed to four reasons:

- a) Lack of parental education: Most of these children saw their parents working and earning money despite having little formal education. So, a general lack of motivation is already there, and no or little impetus from parents doesn't help the cause. Here, we will not discuss female education; we will make a separate section for that. This explanation proves right because Survi observed that the more educated mother was very enthusiastic and interested in her daughter's education.
- b) Lack of motivation among teachers - If students are not very motivated, it is the primary duty of a teacher to engage them and teach at their level. A good teacher can make revolutionary changes in a student's life through their teaching, which should not be limited to the syllabus content itself. In that respect, "The Ron Clark Story" is one of the legendary examples in modern-day education. (https://youtu.be/Qj4WIMVX_mM?si=-hnGfK9Q1C03ovcZ). We suspect the teachers are teaching for the sake of teaching, not with the motivation and effort to make some real changes.
- c) Lack of return from education and role model - As observed in the views of the host in Dongarwadi, there is an utter sense of helplessness, along with very little hope left in education. The causes are a lack of sufficient respectful job opportunities and rampant corruption in the bureaucratic process. Another important aspect came from the discussion with our hosts for this trip. The people who even become successful tend to avoid and obliterate any connection with those village people, as they want to be part of a more modern elite regime that doesn't align with those villagers. Besides, there is a constant, understandable fear among successful people that their children might get into the same bad habits and influences they tried so hard to escape. Those people who were left behind also view them in a very different light and cut all their connections. So, anyway, the result is a lack of any visible role model to inspire them.
- d) Cultural and structural constraints - These children and their fathers have watched their people engaging in work from early days. So that has become the norm, and people see that the

earlier they get employment, the more they can sustain their families. In the face of acute unemployment and poverty, it is much more convenient than spending so much time on education and all. Once they start earning, it becomes hard to return them to education. So a cycle forms, which becomes hard to solve.

2) The poor condition of the woman- The relatively poor state of the woman can be ascribed to deep cultural and structural violence inflicted upon them by the society that was very evident in our overall observations. We accept the exceptions here, but we need to consider the overall scenario to provide an explanation. Given their relative lack of education, all the pointers above apply even more strongly. The family that is not relatively poor chooses to invest in their son's education rather than their daughter's. This effect is ingrained in our patriarchal belief systems of daughters as something made for another house (cultural violence). This results in impropotional resource distribution and can be called a type of structural violence against women. Besides, a constant fear that the girl could fall into the wrong hands leads to early marriages, and the girls kind of accepted it. Besides, they have seen their mothers, grandmothers, and close relatives all content with that system, so they can't find any better situation. So a general apathy towards education arises among them, and they cannot understand its importance in their future, and mostly leave their studies in between. Though the host in the Dongarwadi claimed that he wants to marry his daughter after they become 18, one of them told Sonam that his marriage is almost fixed this year or next year. The structural and cultural constraints are evident in Survi's observation, in which the organisation's female volunteer faces constant criticism and pressure from her husband regarding her work choices. Another important aspect is how the mother's education is positively shaping her daughter's educational landscape. The lack of significant notable role model figures among them makes the already existing problem worse.

3) Migration and illegal settlement - Here, we are not justifying any illegal settlement, but trying to find a reasonable explanation of its causes. This is not a sporadic phenomenon, but a result of long structural and cultural violence inflicted upon those people. It was evident in the talk with the Dongarwadi host. He said these people were constantly deprived of basic necessities, including water, education, electricity, and healthcare. This is a

classic case of structural violence developed on long standing cultural and social inequalities. These illegal settlements and electricity thefts can be seen as ways of asserting their rights, amid constant deprivation and exploitation. This aspect is very evident in Partha Chatterjee's text on the "Civil and Political Society in postcolonial democracies". So, instead of blaming them for everything, we need to maintain a human understanding of the situation, improve their living conditions, and provide opportunities that are consistently denied to them.

4) Acute alcoholism - This issue is also complex, which has to be dealt with care. Though it has a cultural connotation attached to it, social factors like lack of employment, depression, and anxiety, the nature of work also kind of influences that decision. The worst sufferers are the children who, in their tender age gets addicted to those substances by the bad influence of their surroundings, as evident in the Child's narration of Arushi.

5) Lack of toilets and sanitary conditions - As observed by most of the campers, these people have TVs, sometimes a fridge, and motorcycles, which are considered indicators of modernity and economic progress, but you will rarely find fully functional toilets or washrooms. The first reason is a lack of a piped water connection in most households. But another implicit reason is the villagers' constant striving to live like city people, and the most striking features of modernity in a household are still TVs, Fridges, modern electronic gadgets, and vehicles. In that race, they completely ignore the importance of toilets and washrooms. This issue is also of great importance to the dignity and safety of the female population, but still, little work has been done in this regard. While discussing the efficacy of the Central government's flagship scheme to build toilets under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, we learned that it is not solely the government's fault. People don't use those toilets and often don't feel comfortable around them. So they use those toilets for other purposes, like storehouses, and keep going outside. Another reason can also be the lack of awareness among people regarding the dangers and consequences of open defecation, such as the risk of spreading many communicable diseases, and water and soil pollution associated with it. Similarly, with waste disposal in riverine bodies. As stated earlier, the lack of proper awareness among those people and the poor waste-disposal system are responsible for these side effects.

6) Increase in screen time among small children - Though this phenomenon is widespread among people nowadays, but this problem seemed to be very serious among children. They were mostly occupied with their mobiles, not very happy, and showed resentment when it was taken away. This addictiveness is very hazardous, particularly among small children, as they might get exposed to harmful materials inappropriate to their age, and it can have side effects on their mental and social development as well.

4. Possible ways for a solution

As correctly stated by our host for the camp in our concluding meeting, there is no simple solution to this deep rooted problems. We need to constantly strive to make them aware and self-reliant. We have to mould our understanding and apply it to those people in a manner they find acceptable. The path has to be a constant negotiation, like between a willful patient and a doctor. As the organisation is doing in this case, providing those people with basic education in their free time without hampering their work schedule. This helps them become more aware citizens and learn new things, while also motivating them towards skill-based education. There is a growing need for role models among those people, and successful people need to be motivated to join the movement and shed their fear. It is said, truthfully, that without entering into the dirt, you can't possibly clean it. So, they have to come forward and help their fellow people grow out of the state they are stuck in. Yes, this will take some time, but there is no simple way out, as it is said: "Rome was not built in a day ". After all, aspiration and hope are what keep our race intact and moving. We can only hope that the sincere efforts of the people will bring about significant change in their livelihood.

Day 2 (8th March):

The session began with a reflective group discussion where students shared their experiences and key learnings, followed by final feedback from Sir and Ma'am. The program concluded with a formal vote of thanks to all contributors. Students visited the Karnala Bird Sanctuary and Karnala Fort to explore the region's natural biodiversity and historical significance. The Karnala Fort has a rich history dating back to around the 12th century, when it was likely built under the rule of the Devagiri Yadavas. Due to its strategic

location overlooking the trade routes between the Konkan coast and the Deccan plateau, the fort was of great military importance. It later came under the control of the Gujarat Sultanate and then the Ahmadnagar Sultanate. In the 17th century, it was captured by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who recognised its strategic value and incorporated it into the Maratha defence network. Afterwards, the fort changed hands between the Mughals and the Marathas, and was finally taken over by the British in the early 19th century following the Third Anglo-Maratha War. Today, the fort stands within the Karnala Bird Sanctuary as a historical monument, known especially for its distinctive pinnacle called “Pandu’s Tower,” and serves as a popular trekking and heritage site.



Some glimpses from Karnala fort and the Bird sanctuary

Finally, after completing the visit, the group departed in an organised manner for the return journey to the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

Key Takeaways

- Migration from a place is not voluntary but an outcome of the prevailing sociopolitical and economic phenomenon. Illegal settlements or resource exploitation are not something generated out of will here, but a result of socio-economic inequalities and constant denial of the basic human facilities in their native place.
- The deep-rooted problems in society and the challenges these people face can't be solved in a day or a few years. It will take decades, and in some cases, even longer. It is imperative that all stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organisations, and influential individuals, step up together and continually strive to uproot the deep-seated socioeconomic inequalities among them. Then only can we move towards their integral development.
- The education system has to be moulded into a value and skill-based system for dropouts, suitable to their needs. Sports can be introduced as a career opportunity for these children, as they are more enthusiastic about sports, and a visible career can be built on their talent.
- Simple awareness programmes for the sake of awareness won't do any good, as is evident among the villagers. It has to be integrated into their daily lives and made more lively and interactive so they can feel its impact.
- Developing trust among those people won't be instant; it can only be built over years of shared work, failures, and responsibilities.



Explore, Evolve, and Engage!