

The Notion of Dwelling among the Semi-Nomadic Sheep-Breeders: Insights from *Rabaris* of Gujarat, India

Heli Chirag Patel¹ & Aparna²

¹Freelancer Architect, Ahmedabad, ²Associate Professor, Institute of Architecture and Planning, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, India.

helip2502@gmail.com; aparna@nirmauni.ac.in

Received	Accepted	Published
02.08.2025	27.09.2025	30.09.2025

Abstract

Currently, the world is urbanized by more than half, and India is expected to acquire this status by 2050. Urbanization, though closely linked to human migration patterns, assumes the idea of universal sedentarism. Nonetheless, there are communities and people known to deviate from this mainstream idea. India, with its largest population by country and being at the cusp of socio-economic transition, still hosts such traditional social groups for whom being ‘on the move’ has been a way of life. Sometimes, these groups lead a semi-nomadic way of life with a fixed place called ‘home’ that they keep going back to cyclically or occasionally. One such group is the *maaldharis* or pastoralists. Gujarat is traditionally known for its large livestock population and its rearers. Several of these livestock owners follow a nomadic lifestyle in search of fodder, water, markets and income. Pastoral economy to food security is immense. Therefore, the communities engaging in a pastoral life must be understood. Therefore, this research traces the notion of dwelling among the semi-nomadic *Rabari* sheep-breeders of Kutch district in Gujarat.

It uses a case study approach through inductive ethnography as a method to capture the physical expression and ‘notion’ of dwelling for a group of *Rabari* households migrating in a cluster. The households in the campsite were visited multiple times during a six-month-long study in the year 2024. Their interaction with their living environment was observed through changing seasons, village sites, and group formations.

The study reveals a strong focus on territoriality and group dynamics among them in establishing a sense of ‘being at home’. In this context, creating a semblance of territoriality becomes a key mechanism through which people assert belongingness and identify the host villages. However, the experience is often differentiated by gender. The demarcation and organization of campsite arrangement is informed by the socio-economic status of the households. Further, the households re-create the arrangement of household activities in temporary dwellings at the campsite relating to the physical settings of their permanent homes in the native villages. Dwelling, as an idea is found to be not static, but an ongoing, relational process emerging from mobility and collective spatial engagement. Further, the ‘notion of dwelling’ is dependent on memory, continuity, inter-household dynamics, and physical comfort.

Keywords: Semi-nomadic, notion of dwelling, pastoralist, sheep-breeders, *Maaldharis*, *Rabari*, Kutch, Gujarat, India

Introduction

The world is rapidly urbanizing, resulting in human life becoming commodified with acquisition of increasingly processed material goods and becoming mostly sedentary. Though, one could argue that rapid urbanization is also caused by migration and mobility; for a large majority this does not mean shifting bases every few days. This process of sedentarization tends to overlook the alternative ways of life that have sustained communities for centuries. In a post-industrial society, it is rather difficult to conceive a simple and very basic existence for entire community of people who are constantly on the move. What must be their predicament while on the move, what would be the nature of their shelter, and how would they arrive at their sense of comfort and belongingness, are some emergent questions.

Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists have an unusual way of living. They are an integral part of natural ecosystems while also situating themselves within and around other human settlements. These communities are gradually vanishing and slowly adapting to a permanent way of life. It is said that their absence can impact the ecology as they carry indigenous ecological knowledge acquired through generations and centuries of close living amidst nature (Arjjumend, 2018). Pastoralists have employed elaborate rangeland management practices for millennia, including the use of fire and intensive grazing to promote the growth of palatable grasses and reduce the encroachment of bushes. Such strategies have been shown to create conditions favourable for wildlife (Davies & Hatfield, 2006). Sedentarization of these communities can lead to overgrazing, environmental degradation, and land disputes. Pastoralists support dryland agriculture and are experts in managing grasslands, and fragile ecosystems through rotational grazing. Despite being an important part of human ecology in Indian rural society, they are neglected and often live on the margins both geographically and politically (Rangnekar, 1993; Choksi & Dyer, 1996). They have evolved their way of living with increasing challenges posed by a rapidly modernizing society, and have been adjusting to minimal resources and making the most out of it (Arjjumend, 2018; Choksi & Dyer, 1996). As the world talks about sustainable development (United Nations, 2015), ironically, we may be losing the very culture that embodies sustainability. Significantly, semi-nomadic communities offer an important counterpoint to the homogenizing tendencies of modernity, which demands protection and encouragement. Rather than being seen as remnants of the past, such communities embody living traditions that emphasize resilience, community living, and balance with nature. If vernacular architecture is 'of and by the people' as suggested by Oliver (2006), then the dwellings of nomadic groups claims a rightful discourse.

Thereby, this paper presents the study of a Pastoral community living an itinerant life for most part of the year, and their identification with the idea of 'home' - something that has connotations of being predictable, one finds comfort in and something one goes back to. Thereby, the 'notion of dwelling' has been proposed to comprise of two components – firstly, formal – that relates to the physical determinants of 'a dwelling'; while the second one refers to the substantive or the experience of dwelling. This paper explores these concepts in relation to the context of semi-nomadic environmental behaviour of pastoralists from Kutch in India. A need was felt to explore the notion of dwelling and points of reference for those who are constantly on the move – how they connected with the idea of shelter. India, like several countries still have semi-nomadic pastoral communities travelling across the regions for their livelihoods. Known as *maaldharis* – literally, the asset-owners, spread across the arid and semi-arid zones of the western Indian state of Gujarat, are the subject of this paper. More specifically, the community at the centre of this study is the *Rabari* sheep-breeders from Kutch in northern part of the state. This research aims to understand the meaning attributed to the idea of 'to dwell' by the semi-nomadic community of sheep breeders of Kutch. The key objectives of this research are:

- 1) to identify factors considered by semi-nomadic *Rabari* sheep breeders of Kutch to locate themselves within the landscape while on the move;
- 2) to map the permanent and temporary dwelling conditions of sheep-breeders and their spatial relationship; and,

- 3) to examine the experiential quality of *Rabari dwellings* while they are on the move and, in their permanent homes so as to establish the meaning attributed to their dwelling.

Theoretical Framework

Human beings, like other species of the animal kingdom, embody space around them. When this association prolongs and brings a positive personal association, the experience could be termed as ‘home’ or ‘dwelling’. Rudofsky, in his work, *Architecture without Architects* (1964), highlights the way animal and human communities have realized their living environment in a concerted, intuitive manner, without engaging in a pre-emptive design philosophy. The term dwelling is a complex one, with philosophers across various disciplines having proposed theories. Rapoport (1969) states that dwelling is not merely a shelter object, it's a process embedded in culture. Many non-utilitarian factors seem of primary importance in the critical field of the domestication of animals. Tim Ingold (1980) defines and conceptualizes the term ‘pastoralism’ and its systems as non-monolithic; exhibiting a varied configuration of human-animal interaction. Pastoralism is categorized through the lens of taming, herding, and breeding. Animals may become an integral part of the household, and they may live near, but it is not necessary that they are genetically modified, which is referred to as taming.

Herding involves managing animals in groups, guiding their movements to access the resource. While selective breeding is the act that alters an animal's inherited traits. The interaction of animals with a settled life reflects taming; while, herding aligns with mobility. Ingold (1980) adds that mobility can be partial; it can be seasonal movement of a herd, accompanied by a group of people in a community, while other members stay at a native settlement. Partial mobility characterizes semi-nomadic pastoralism.

Rapoport (1969) describes the culture of the Masai tribe associated with cattle rearing. Here, cattle are not considered only as wealth but have a ‘mystical, religious, and ceremonial importance, transcending their economic value. The settlement patterns clearly revolve around cattle and a need to keep and guard them. He emphasises that dwellings in the same area can be different, as some are driven by culture while some are driven by climate. Communities that are rooted with a strong sense of culture, their corresponding dwelling type and settlement system, their taboos, introduce discomfort and complications, and become more important than climatic imperatives. On a similar note, Oliver (1987) discusses that dwelling has double significance: one is the activity of living and residing, manifesting the cultural aspect of dwelling; second is the artefact, which relates to the physicality and materiality of dwelling. He discusses dwelling in the context of ‘tribal, nomad, peasant, migrant, folk’, where the context warrants it. He embraces different forms of dwelling that are not professionally designed structures, which we call vernacular buildings. Vernacular buildings embody tested environmental intelligence with lessons for contemporary design; and can be permanent and temporary. This understanding of dwelling as both lived practice and material form provides a bridge to broader theoretical reflections on place and meaning, particularly in relation to the phenomenological approach (Norberg-Schulz, 1985).

The theoretical foundation and conceptual framework of this study are based on Phenomenology (Norberg-Schulz, 1985) which articulates the concept of dwelling. Its interpretation of the term dwelling explores the interplay of an individual and the built environment. According to Schultz (1985), Man settles down with a sense of identification and orientation within a specific space. He says,

“Identification means to experience a ‘total’ environment as meaningful... to relate meaningfully to a world of things... (and orienting)... to carry out actions.”

(Schultz, 1985:15).

Norberg-Schulz (1985) has defined these two terms – ‘identification’ and ‘orientation’ for any dwelling unit. He used the term ‘dwelling’ to describe the experience of early humans

who first chose to settle, and by extension, for communities that lived in permanent settlements. In such cases, settlers identified with and oriented themselves to land with the intention of remaining there permanently. For *Rabaris* – subject of our study, who are constantly on the move, their sense of identification and orientation is shaped by the awareness that they will migrate to another place within a few days. The two concepts he is referring to are also applicable with respect to how a notion of dwelling is created when the context changes.

This study specifically deploys the dwelling framework proposed by Norberg-Schulz. In addition, notion of dwelling or sense of home, its experience and feeling, is also explored through lenses of various other scholars who have looked at it in different contexts. Their perspectives will be elaborated in the subsequent literature review which serve as the elements of the analytical framework.

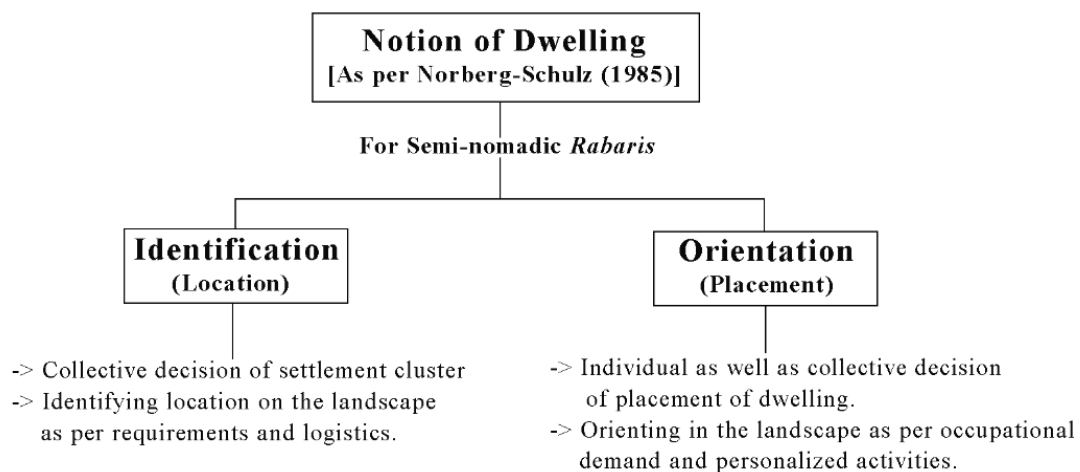


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework.
Source: Author

Literature Review

Scholars have extensively examined the socio-cultural and economic contexts of *Rabari* pastoralists, providing a foundation for understanding their livelihoods and ways of living. Kohler-Rollefson (1992), highlights the socio-economic challenges faced by pastoralists across India. He briefly outlines the regional and climatic conditions that have shaped pastoralism.

According to him, the ‘Old World Arid Zone Belt,’ stretching from the northern Africa to northern Asia, has given rise to many pastoral cultures. Geographically, nomadic pastoralists are most prevalent in drylands. Consequently, large communities of pastoralists are concentrated in western India, with smaller but prominent groups found in the Himalayas, and several others spread over many parts of the entire country. In Africa and the Middle East, pastoralists are generally organized around specific territories, whereas in India, they are integrated into the caste system and represent endogamous social groups. Kohler-Rollefson report the socio-economic challenges they face, including policy biases, declining grazing lands, and limited access to veterinary care, while also noting the role of institutions and organizations working to represent their interests and proposing future research priorities for sustainable pastoral development.

Building on this discussion, Rangnekar (1993) critiques the common misrepresentation of nomadic pastoralists as resistant to change. Instead, he argues that they possess rich cultural traditions and highly sophisticated knowledge of livestock breeding, feed resources, and herd management. This observation emphasizes the adaptive and dynamic nature of pastoralist knowledge systems. In line with this argument, Choksi and Dyer (1996) focus specifically on the *Rabaris*, who faced shrinking pastures due to forestry policies, agricultural expansion, and

industrial development, alongside the impact of dairy policies. These changes collectively led to a significant loss of land for pastoral use. In response, the *Rabaris* adapted strategies, shifting from traditional vocations to more commercial practices such as selling wool, milk, and animals, as well as purchasing village or agricultural land to secure grazing and gradually move towards agrarian settlements.

Continuing this trajectory of adaptation, Priyanka (2022) introduces the concept of ‘acculturation,’ which refers to the psychological and cultural changes brought about by cross-cultural interactions. She observes how migration of the *Rabaris* of Gujarat, who migrated from Rajasthan, to regions such as Jamnagar, Mehsana, and other districts of Saurashtra region in Gujarat, transformed their cultural practices. Their clothing, embroidery, and belief systems have been influenced by dominant cultural groups, and over time, they have acquired both abstract and material cultural traits known as the Gujarati *Rabaris*. Even their transient dwelling forms have begun to reflect these new influences, a process that aligns with the theory of dwelling (Oliver, 1987). The culture and current status of the *Rabaris*, is closely linked to the physical form of dwelling as well as their way of life. In this, the notion of dwelling is an experience extending beyond the material form of shelter.

Dwelling, as discussed in a broader perspective, is not solely about physical shelter—it can also be understood as a state of well-being, encompassing feelings of rootedness, peace, and possibility. One may reside in a house and yet feel a sense of existential homelessness, or conversely, feel at home even in unfamiliar environments. Todres and Galvin (2010) present a framework that explores this tension between a desire for stability and an urge for adventure, drawing on the concept of *Gegnet* - the abiding expanse (Heidegger, 1966). They describe that existential homelessness may occur even within one’s own home, while belonging can be experienced in distant places. Moreover, they explain the aspects governing existential homelessness. “Uncanniness” is the term used by Heidegger (1966), referring to a feeling of being anxious and alone, even at home, which can lead to the feeling of being homeless.

In the same way, “ill health” can generate a sense of being homeless. They further explore the term “Letting be-ness” stated by Heidegger (1966), which could be presented as the idea of openness to allow whatever is there to simply be present in the manner that it is present before one rushes in to try to change it, and just “willing” to dwell.

Similarly, Ahmed (1999), based on interviews conducted in both Eastern and Western contexts of India—including accounts of displacement during the Partition—demonstrates that “comfort” and “familiarity” are central to the experience of home. Giuliani (1991) extends this perspective by examining individuals across different socio-economic backgrounds and age groups, revealing how psychological bonds with dwelling places are formed beyond observable behaviors. He argues that other than familiar people, “objects” inside the house can also provide continuity of self and a sense of rootedness. These analytical parameters, which are uncanniness, letting-be-ness, willingness, comfort, familiarity, health, security, and objects of attachment derived from the above literature, are particularly relevant for studying *Rabari* families, with attention to differences shaped by gender and age.

Taken together, these insights suggest that dwelling encompasses both physical and experiential dimensions. The tangible characteristics of *Rabari* dwellings can be documented, yet a deeper question persists: while constantly on the move, do the *Rabaris* truly experience a sense of being at home? The literature on dwelling and home thus provides a valuable set of lenses to examine the experiential qualities of *Rabari* living spaces, particularly in terms of the attributes that contribute to the feeling of ‘being at home.’

The Research Background: Gujarat State and Pastoralism

In India, nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists can be divided into groups that practice horizontal movement and vertical movement. In the Himalayas and some parts of Maharashtra, pastoralists travel from lowlands to highlands seasonally. On the other hand, the majority of the pastoralists of western India travel to comparatively ‘greener’ pasture zones in search of fodder, even if it is crop residue on the harvested farmlands. Specifically talking about Gujarat state in

the western part of India, livestock breeding is one of the oldest and unique occupations, where more cattle are owned by pastoralists than by the farming community. "Pastoralism in Gujarat is an ancient practice, as can be seen from the archaeological evidence dating back to the Harappan society (1400- 1700 B.C)" (Choksi, 1991:1). Pastoralism is distributed all over Gujarat, while nomadism is practiced by those located in arid and semi-arid regions, and the majority of these communities of livestock breeders are settled in Kutch and Saurashtra. Most of the pastoralists in Saurashtra are settled and partially dependent on agriculture. On the contrary, in and around Kutch, environmental conditions have unique soil characteristics, including a clayey soil that is struggling with infertility, and a proximate salt desert. Poor conditions for agriculture in these areas have historically generated strong dependency on livestock herds. The scarcity of resources, such as fodder and water, necessitated the cyclic migration of nomads with their herds.

Rabaris, Bharwads, and Banjaras are the prominent *maaldhari* communities that practice a semi-nomadic way of life. Among these communities, *Rabaris* are the largest group of semi-nomads who still practice pastoralism and migrate over a larger span of the year across Gujarat and surrounding states. They are thought to be initially camel breeders, but now diversified into small ruminants also. These nomadic societies have still survived because of their ability to adapt to the physical and cultural environments. They are part of large clans and an extended family system, but are segregated into smaller groups depending on kinship and the need to manage large herds along different routes.

Specifically, *Rabaris* of Kutch are divided by regions. *Gardo & Kutchi Rabaris* are from the west, *Dhebaria* and *Kantho* from the center, and *Vagadiya* from the eastern region of Kutch (Chowksi, 1991). While *Sorathiya Rabaris* are basically associated with the Saurashtra region however the locals of Kutch consider *Rabaris* after the canal passes as *Sorathiya Rabaris*. This study is based on *Vagadiya* and *Sorathiya Rabaris*. They generally have fewer livestock and migrate across Patan, Surendranagar, and Banaskantha districts of Gujarat for 8-10 months and return to their native village for the rest of the year.

Research Methodology

The study employs case study as a method using inductive ethnography for data collection. A review of literature as presented above, provides a background for more immersive fieldwork and observations.

The methodology comprises two complementary components. The first centres on ethnographic observation, while the second involves one-to-one, in-depth conversations. The first component involved a diverse set of tools used to document their way of life. These included mapping through primary observations and tracing their migration routes, sketching measured drawings of plans and sections of the physical form of their temporary and permanent dwellings, and creating an inventory of the materials they carried during their travels. Visual documentation, such as photographs, videos, and field notes, provided further evidence of their spatial practices. The second component comprises one-to-one conversations.

For the Case study, a first-hand field study was conducted with a group of *Vagadiya* and *Sorathiya Rabari* families from Kutch, India. This subject is introduced by a sheep veterinarian affiliated with a government organization in the Patan district of Gujarat. His local knowledge and professional engagement with the community were instrumental in identifying relevant and willing households for in-depth study and observation. Here, the household refers to the number of people who are eating from the same kitchen - census of India definition.

As shown in the fig. 2, the group of *Vagadiya Rabari* families permanently resides in the Rapar district of Kutch. The *Sorathiya Rabaris* belong to Bakutra village at Santalpur taluka of Patan district in Gujarat, where their permanent dwelling setup was also documented for understanding the point of reference during transience. Shiyol, Bhilvan, Kembua, Vadu, and Vagdod were the villages where this particular group migrated during the study period for fodder and set up campsites at different locations. The main reason behind selecting these particular communities is their migration route and the time period within the research period.

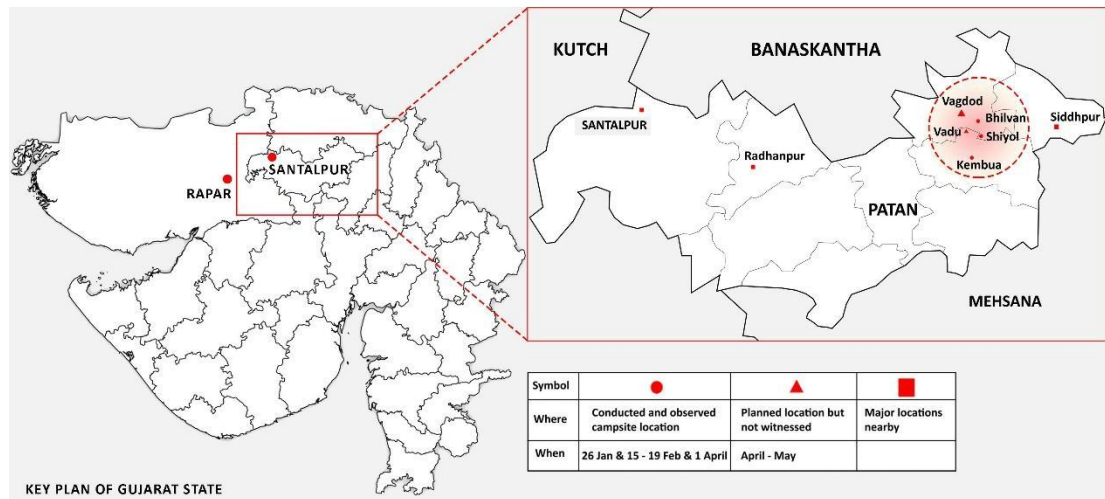


Fig. 2: Map of Gujarat State with detail of Patan district and cluster of villages where household cases locate temporarily.

Source: Author

The fieldwork was conducted over a period of four months, during which four site visits were made. The study period was from January to June. These visits took place across different seasons to capture the variations in their dwelling patterns.

Table 1: Time period of the visits. Source: Author









Visit No	Period	Location	Type of Site	Season
1	Late January	Shiyol village, Patan district	Campsite	Winter
2	Mid-February	Bhilvan village, Patan district	Campsite	Spring
3	Late February	Bakutra village, Santalpur Taluka, Patan district	Permanent settlement	Spring
4	Mid-April	Kembua village, Patan district	Campsite	Summer

During these visits, data was collected through a combination of on-field observations and interviews with community members. Each of the visits to the campsite lasted two to three days. In the mode of participant observation, researcher stayed with the community in their native village on third visit. Gradually, a close and warm relationship was forged which help in data collection and getting responses during the interview. The interviews were conducted based on the parameters derived from the literature review and translated in the local language, to discuss the sense of home with them. These attributes were uncanniness, letting-be-ness, and willingness, mentioned by Todres and Galvin (2010), complementing the ideas of Heidegger (1966); comfort and familiarity by Ahmed (1991); security, health, and objects of attachment from the work of Giuliani (1991). A total of 20 individuals, drawn from four households, were included in the study. It comprised both males and females, spanning an age range of 3–62 years. These households were multi-generational, reflecting a joint family structure. Males and females of three different age groups, from each household present on the campsite, were interviewed. These interactions helped reveal how individuals perceived and adapted their domestic spaces in different contexts. It was quite challenging that they often diverted attention to their poor economic condition, vulnerability, and limited cooperation from the farming communities and the government. These insights are explained in detail in the findings section describing the meaning of dwelling for these *Rabari* households.

Introduction to the Study Households

The *Rabari* group of pastoralists studied had a total of four households, among them three were from Santalpur taluka of Patan District and one from Rapar taluka of Kutch district, Gujarat. One of the daughters from Santalpur is married to the household from Rapar, and that's how they are related to each other. “*Vandhiyo*” in Gujarati refers to a nuclear family or a household within the larger group who are migrating together. In this paper, each of the households is denoted by numbers, i.e., *Vandhiyo* 1, *Vandhiyo* 2, etc. Table 2 describes the number of family members in each household and the number of ruminants they own.

Table 1: Data of each household and the number of ruminants they own.
Source: Author

Sr no	Household (Vandhiyo)	Rabari Group	Family Members	Livestock
1	1	<i>Sorathiya</i>		 200 Sheep & Goats
2	2	<i>Vagadiya</i>		 1 Camel 300 Sheep & Goats
3	3	<i>Sorathiya</i>		 200 Sheep & Goats
4	4	<i>Sorathiya</i>		 50 Sheep & Goats

The Migration Route of the Families

At the very beginning of winter in late November, like every year, *Rabari* pastoralists embarked on their journey from their native village, Bakutra, Santalpur taluka of Patan district; they were three households having a total of ten members with 450 sheep and goats. They reported reaching Shiyol village of east Patan towards the end of January. Sheep breeders from Vagad reached the village by the end of February and joined the rest of the group members; they are one household having a total of four members, and the rest of them are at the native house with a camel and 300 small ruminants. Their migration covers roughly 150 km over one and a half to two months, they stay in some villages on the way as shown in Fig. 3. During this time, they spent two to three weeks stationed in each of the villages - Shiyol, Bhilvan, Kembua, Vadu, Vagdod, village cluster, as shown in Fig.3. Their travel methods vary. While all *Rabaris* walk alongside their herds, the *Sorathiya Rabaris* utilize tractors for their heavier belongings, and the *Vagadiya Rabaris* rely on carrier animals, such as camels, for transportation.

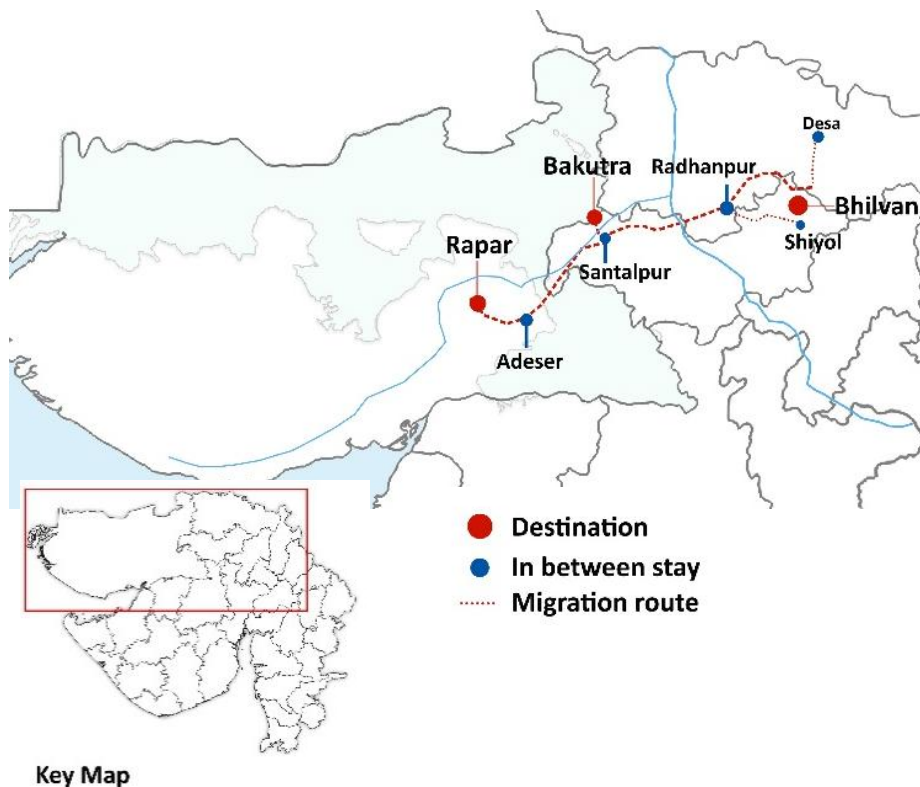


Fig. 2: Migration Route of *Vagadiya & Sorathiya Rabaris*.
Source: Author

Permanent and Transient Shelters - A Comparative Analysis

The study households were found to have a settled way of living for two months and a nomadic life for the rest of the year. This section presents a comparative spatial analysis of the permanent and temporary shelters set up by the *Vagadiya and Sorathiya Rabaris* in their native and campsite villages.

Permanent Settlement

The permanent houses of the *vandhiyas* 3 & 4 were documented; they were located in Bakutra village, Santalpur. Only *Vandhiya* 4 has been shown in detail in fig. 4. Both houses have different scales and spaces. The house of *Vandhiya* 4 has fewer family members, and they have only 50 livestock; hence, they have smaller spaces, including less space for sheep and goats. The house of *Vandhiya* 3 has more family members, and they have nearly 300 livestock; therefore, they have a huge *wada* – sheep penn in the front yard and have a bigger *ordo* – room for storage. This dwelling structure has all the facilities, including an electricity connection and a water supply. Below the wooden frame roofing structure, there is an attic for storage outside *ordo*, while the latter has vessel display space above – a common feature in *Rabari* houses.

The innermost area is *ordo*, which is closed and is used as a storeroom and for sleeping during monsoons and winters. During summer, they slept outdoors. This is followed by a huge verandah almost equivalent to the *ordo*, and then an open space in the front, which is more flexible for animals and social activities. The kitchen space is placed outside, and the *Chullah* – woodfire cookstove is set up for cooking. This space, along with the open area in the front, acts as a social gathering space for the whole family and neighborhood. All the houses have a *wada* or *chowk* – yard in the front of the house or the back to keep livestock within compound walls; however, they also have a net fencing around the animals at night to prevent their theft. At least one male member is on guard and gets alerted in case of any commotion.

The foundation is of brick or concrete with infilled brick walls and a wooden frame structure with a pitched roof and clay tiles. While traditional *Rabari* houses in Kutch had mud walls and were finished with white-washed houses, having terracotta country tiled wooden sloping timber roofs and *otla* – a sitting ledge in front of the house. However, nowadays the appearance has changed because of the use of contemporary industrial materials for construction, although the spatial arrangement of activities has remained the same over the years. These houses were reconstructed, and the old frame structures were reused; hence, the majority of the houses have wooden frames with carved columns.

If we compare the roles of men and women, men and boys of each household were away during the day grazing livestock nearby, and evenings were devoted to social activities. Women of the family had better facilities in the village. They weren't required to fetch water from a distance, as each house had a water connection. They spent their time doing daily chores such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and also embroidery in their leisure time.

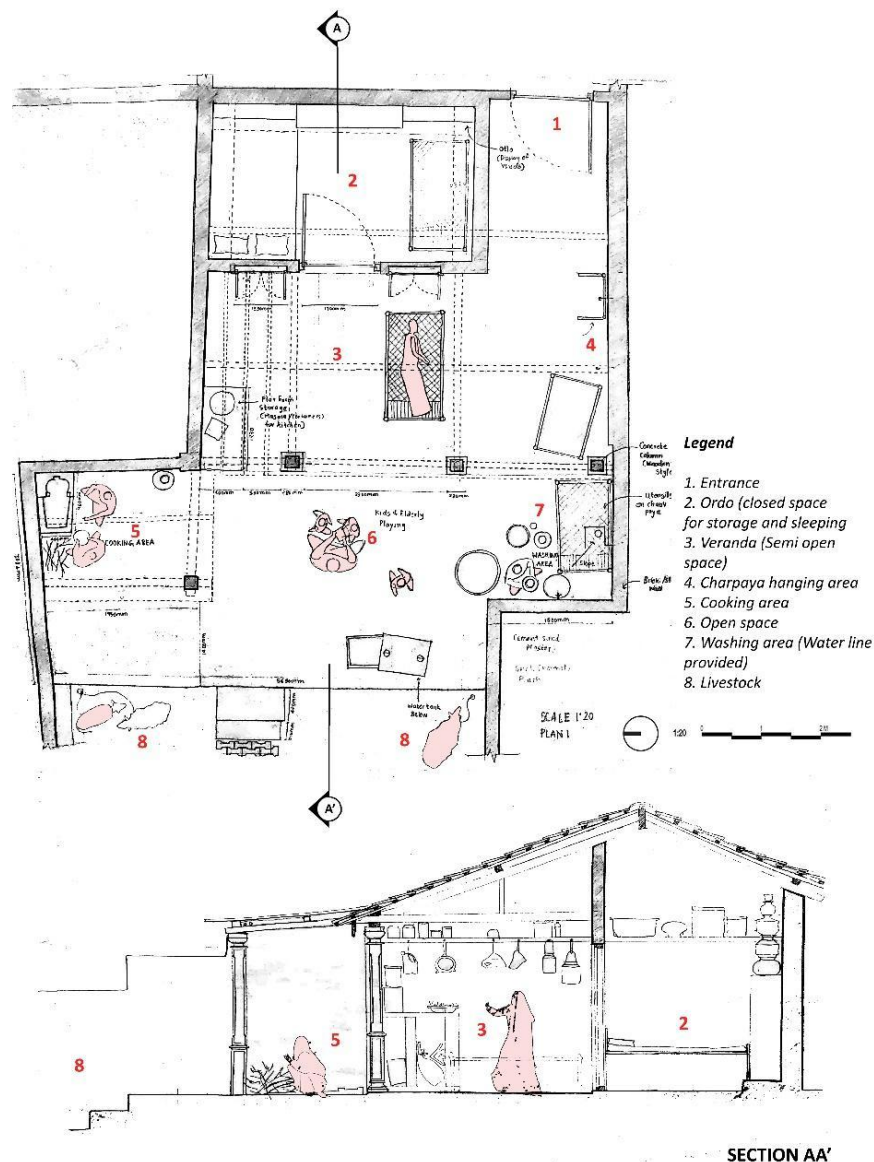


Fig. 3: Plan and section of the permanent settlement of *Vandhiya 4* at the native village.

Source: Author

Temporary Settlement

This group of *Rabaris* kept shifting their campsite within a range of 3-5 km throughout the migration period mainly in search of fodder. Among the five villages in close range - Shiyol, Bhilvan, Kembua, Vadu, and Vagdod, first three campsites were visited during the study period. Only one Campsite at Bhilvan village is explained in detail in this paper.

Bhilvan Campsite

Basic requirements of resources were found to govern the decision to stay at a particular campsite, as was reported by the households regarding the choice of location. The most important factor was the availability of fallow land, followed by water resources. They occupied the fallow lands which were near a drinking water sources. Not only was the drinking water for domestic needs, but also for livestock. The livestock were taken to the nearby water tanks or lakes. Fodder for livestock was the main factor; if there is more availability of grazing resources nearby, then it is more feasible. Men took livestock for grazing collectively and returned to the campsite at night. Reportedly, they travelled almost 15 to 20 km from the campsite. When grazing lands became farther away from the radius of 15 km, then they shifted their campsite. They also needed a market nearby to buy groceries, spices, and other daily requirements, as they were unable to carry all the things from home. It is important to mention that the fallow lands that are temporarily excluded from the current cropping cycle are left for rejuvenation and nutrient enrichment. The *Rabari* pastoralists chose villages that have more fallow land available. There exists a symbiotic relationship between the cultivators and sheep-breeders, the former depending on the nutrient-rich manure from small ruminants to revitalize and prepare their lands for farming, while the latter are in search of fodder, water resources, as well as markets for self-sustenance as well as selling sheep produce.

Arrangement of Dwellings on the Campsite

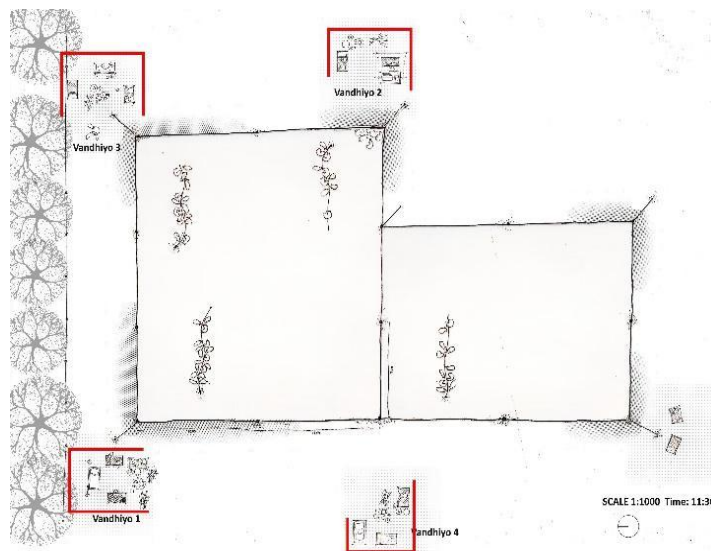


Fig. 4: Placement of *Vandhiyas* and Livestocks on Bhilvan Campsite.

Source: Author

Figure 5 shows that the two diagonally situated enclosures (*vandhiyas* 1 and 2) house large family groups. *Vandhiyo* 3 also accommodates a larger number of individuals, but these were primarily young men who accompanied the herds during the day. Four *Vandhiyas* on the four corners were placed, while at the fifth corner, only a *charpaya-cot* was placed without any shelter. Strategic placement of these enclosures at the center prioritizes the security of their livestock, their most valuable possession.

The arrangement of the larger family groups on diagonal sides fosters a sense of security. During the summer and spring seasons, it was observed that only the diagonal dwellings erected temporary structures for shade during noon time, which acted as a gathering space when members of the other two dwellings gathered here. This kind of placement on-site helps to protect livestock as well as women and children, collectively bringing everyone into the line of vision. Two to three *charpaya* are arranged in an L or C shape in the plan to create an enclosure at the corners.

Physical Structure of *Vandhiya* (house set-up)

Rabaris use four major materials to erect their structure. The main element in their temporary settlement is *charpaya*. *Charpaya* (also known as *Khatla*) not only acts as a piece of furniture but also as a part of the structure. They act as a base to the structure, poles are tied with the *charpaya* act as posts or vertical members, bamboo lengths act as vertical as well as horizontal members, over which is draped a covering sheet for shade. The structure has vertically erected poles at the center of the *charpaya* and the other two on the ground on the other side, such that it creates a minimum of 3m X 3m of shaded space. Then they arrange other *charpayas* within the shelter. If the household has fewer poles and bamboo, young livestock are tied below the *charpaya* to shelter them.

Charpaya and metal poles are carried individually. Each family has their customized sizes of bamboo poles and *charpaya*, while fencing nets, reinforcement bars are carried collectively. They carry all of them together, and anyone who wants can use them. They also carry tools collectively, such as a shovel for levelling and a sickle for weeding and chopping firewood. A hammer for fixing reinforcement bars and poles in the soil. They also carry additional ropes for tightening, covering sheets, and fixing poles with *charpaya*, and these poles are also used to fix belongings on the camel during transportation and to carry baby lambs and kids on the camel.

There is a hierarchy of *Khatlas* in every household, and within these makeshift dwellings, designated areas are assigned for various essential activities, and the sizes of these *charpayas* also dictate the division of activities, as shown in Fig. 6. All of these are spatially arranged in such a way that they clearly define differences in role and gender. On the site, there were three different sizes of *charpaya* observed; each of the unique sizes has a particular function associated with it.

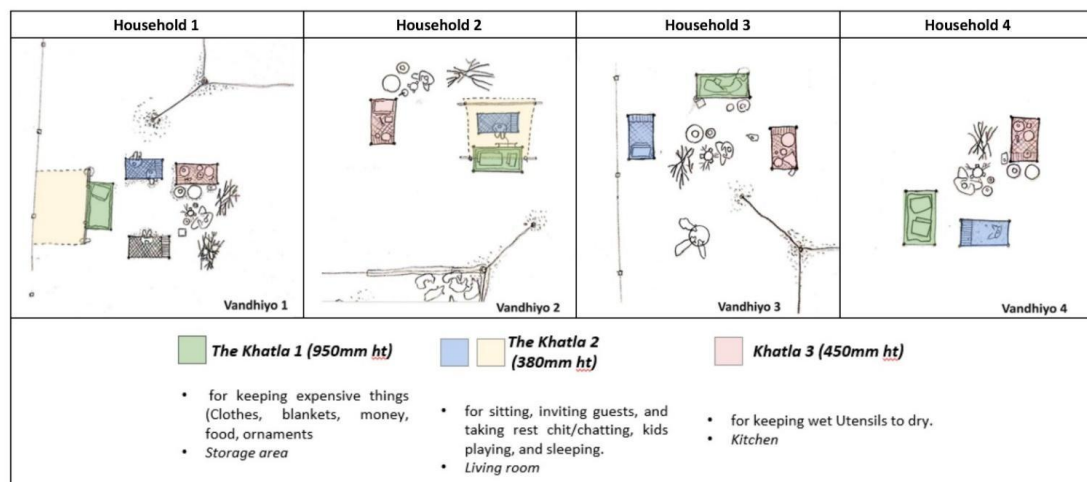


Fig. 5: Internal Structure of *Vandhiyas* showing hierarchy of *Khatlas* and its purpose.

Source: Author

Type 1 *khatla* has more height (almost 1m) as compared to the other two, and it is used for keeping expensive and important things such as clothes, blankets, money and etc. It has more height to keep these things safer.

Type 2 *khatla* has a height that is comfortable for humans ergonomically (450mm), and it is used for sitting, resting, and chit-chatting.

Type 3 *khatla* is of medium size, and it is used for keeping utensils dry. These *khatlas* are the core elements of the temporary shelter. The type three *khatla* is always under the open sky. For obvious reasons, it is closer to the temporary hearth made of bricks or stone. Flours, condiments, oil containers, and other steel vessels are placed below this *Khatla*.

Physical Structure of *Vandhiya* (household) - Response to the Climate

During summer, right from the morning, they set up temporary roof structure to provide shade. Here, the spatial organization undergoes a significant change. Two poles are fixed into type 1 *Khatla*, which forms a core structure, and two additional poles are fixed on the opposite side, with Bamboo as a horizontal structural member. A covering sheet is placed over the framework. One side of the type 1 *khatla* and two type 2 *khatla* are placed side by side, and little space is left in front. In this case, the shaded space acts as a living room. On the other side, the cooking space and washing area are set up. In contrast, in the winter season, the plan has a C-shaped configuration of *Khatla* with the central type 1 *Khatla*. Here as well, type 1 *Khatla* remains the focal point, and other functions are located around it. As shown in Fig. 7, in both of these configurations, territoriality is observed. In the first case, the arrangement of *khatla* and objects forms the territory. In the second case, the pole and shade form the territory. In the first case, the peripheral arrangement helps to keep the central space warm. While the pile arrangement of *Khatla* under the shade is essential for summer.

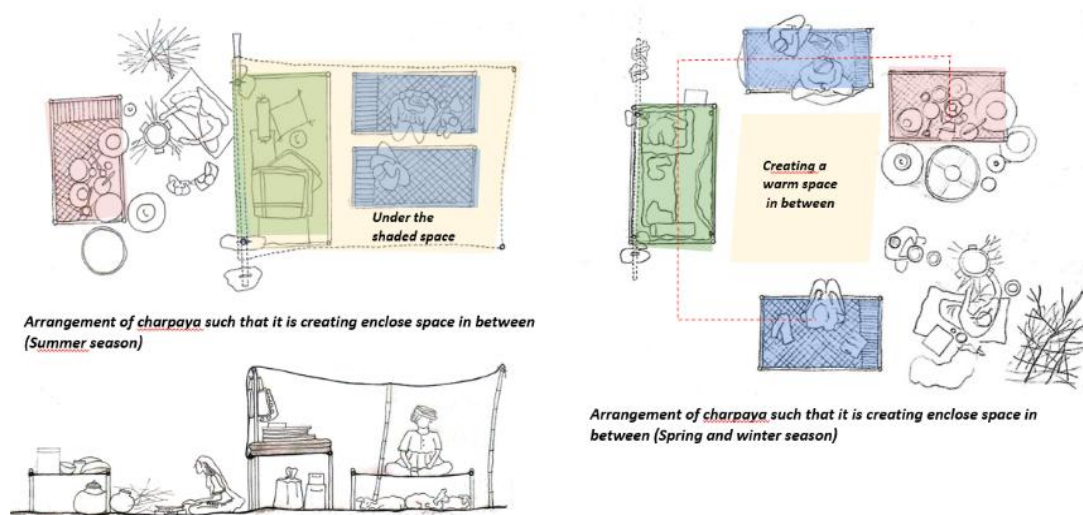


Fig. 6: Different types of spatial arrangement in two seasons, summers (Temporary shade set up) and winters (C configuration of *khatlas* in plan to keep between space warm).

Source: Author

A Day in the Life of *Rabari*

Rabari pastoralists follow structured daily routines, with men primarily responsible for livestock care and women managing domestic tasks. Mornings begin with tending to animals, including seasonal wool shearing, now done for maintenance rather than selling as it barely gets any returns. Men leave by 11 am with packed meals to graze herds up to 15–20 km away, often joined by male children, while women stay back with daughters and elders to cook, clean, and care for young livestock. Elderly men handle milking, and women sell milk locally. Firewood from nearby trees, usually *Prosopis Juliflora*, is collected by men and used by women for cooking on simple brick chullahs. Throughout the day, women fetch water, bathe, wash clothes, and collectively engage in embroidery and blanket-making using rags and reused cloth—traditional crafts often passed down from mother to daughter. They also manage seasonal shelters and shop for daily essentials at the local markets.

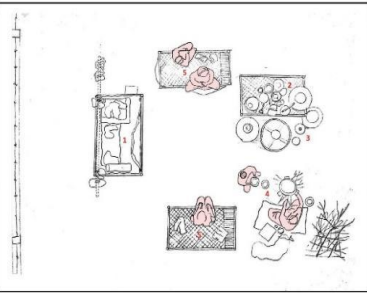
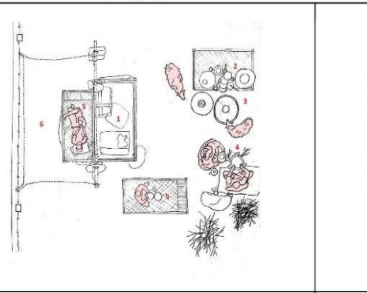
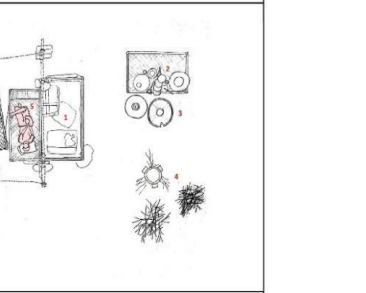
Vandhiyo 1		
		
Morning	Afternoon - Evening	Night
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -> Men getting ready to take livestock for grazing. -> Collected firewood for cooking. -> Women making chai and preparing lunch. -> Young men eating their first meal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -> Older men eating their first meal after young men go. -> Young women fetch water from the nearby source. -> Elder women preparing lunch. -> Temporary shade has been set up. -> Young women after finishing work rest under the shade with her child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -> After enjoying the last meal of the day Elder men, women, and children sleep on charpaya under the shade. -> Young men sleep on the ground near the fencing to keep an eye on livestock.

Fig. 7: Table displays three different arrangements during the day at three time zones and what activities do they perform.

Source: Author

Set Up for Movement

Among the four households, *Vagadiya Rabaris* own a camel, which serves as a pack animal. Men and women jointly dismantle the dwelling units and load them with padded cloth, *Khatla*, bags, and the rest of the materials, with baby livestock secured in slings. Children and elders may ride if the journey is long. On the other hand, the remaining three households of *Sorathiya Rabaris* were deprived of owning any carrier animal and have adopted contemporary ways of transport. They rent tractors to carry belongings. While women manage most packing and reassembly, men often move ahead with livestock. To travel within the cluster of villages, having a 5-6km shift, migration and resettlement are completed within a day.

Findings

Physical Aspect of Dwelling

Notion of dwelling for these semi-nomadic communities may be understood differently from the framework of Norberg-Schulz (1985). These groups, who frequently look for a place to stay, use 'identification' to help choose a location for setting up their campsite. Processes of identification are constituted through occupational and habitat-related logistics. The choice of the campsite depends on the availability of fallow land, water, food for both household and livestock, and access to markets and other necessities. Similarly, 'orientation' for semi-nomadic communities is the placement of individual dwelling units on the campsite, considering various factors for living, and demarcating occupational and household activities. The placement of dwellings has two parts: first, the internal structure of the campsite, which is dependent on collective decisions on-site; and second, the positioning of individual dwellings. Both of these placements simultaneously depend on culture, traditions, and internal dynamics between individual households.

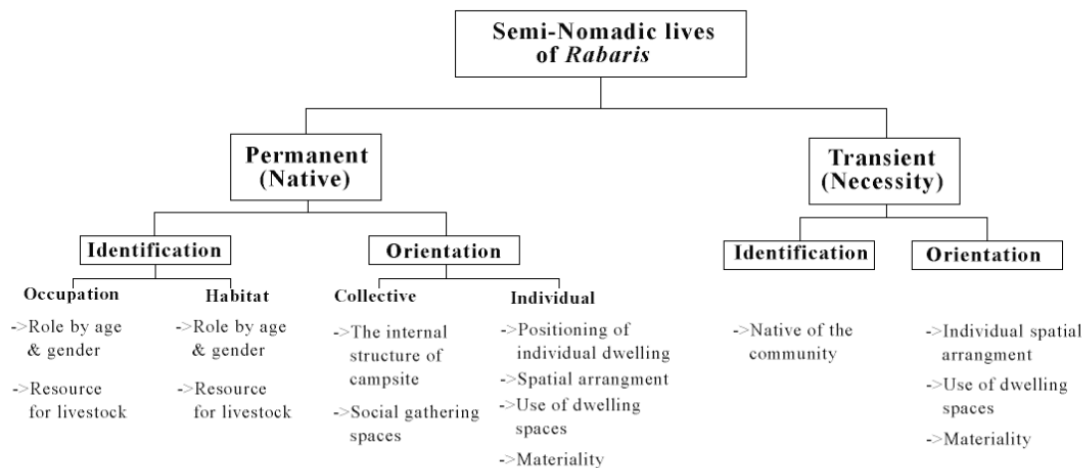


Fig. 8: Physical aspect of dwelling for Rabaris.
Source: Author.

Individual Experiences

The above analysis helps in understanding the physical attributes of *Rabari* dwellings, but it also raises the question of whether they truly experience a sense of being at home. This section presents the second part of the analysis and draws on literature concerning dwelling experience. It is a result of a questionnaire with a Likert scale canvassed to the members present at the campsite. Each question corresponded to specific attributes identified through the literature review of different studies, and the following sections explain these attributes based on the responses received from the household members. Answers vary by age group and gender.

Uncanniness

According to Todres and Galvin (2010), one always feels uncanny when it is not home. The degree of uncanniness for *Rabari* sheep breeders mainly depends on gender. On asking the question about the feeling of uncanniness while on the move, women aged 20–40 described experiencing an uncanny feeling, as though they were being watched, which made them physically uneasy at campsites. Women above 40 explained that they too felt strange and unsettled in new places, however with time, they overcame this uneasiness by following familiar routines that brought a sense of normality. Men above 40 emphasized that their foremost concern during migration was the safety and well-being of their livestock and family, which shaped how they adjusted to these temporary settlements.

Comfort

When dwelling is experienced functionally comfortable, one has a sense of being at home. *Rabari* sheep breeders carry a minimum of goods used for daily activities. They organize the spaces such that the experience and the placement are similar to the spatial arrangement when they are at their native village home. The internal structure of *Vandhiya* remains the same overall although very compressed in area. This move gives them a sense of home and comfort, even if they are in different lands. When asked about the temporality of their dwellings and whether they are comfortable compared to permanent homes, women said that assembling and dismantling them every 15–20 days is tedious. Elderly women added that when alone at campsites, they manage with minimal goods, creating only basic enclosures that offer limited protection. When asked about interpersonal relations and feelings of discomfort, a family with fewer livestock explained that, since they carry only about 50 sheep and goats, they hold a lower social status and must follow the decisions of others, which makes them feel inferior. They added that older men with more livestock usually make decisions, while those with fewer animals are often neglected.

Letting-be-ness

When asked whether *Rabari* sheep breeders experience a sense of *letting-be-ness*—a feeling of peace and acceptance of their surroundings as indicated by—they shared varied responses. Young women explained that parents allowed their children to play freely without restrictions, and that the charpaya often serves as storage for utensils around the cooking and washing areas. Older women mentioned that many things are simply left on the charpaya without being arranged, which creates a natural sense of being at home when one is not at guard. Men emphasized that because they carry little money, they do not fear losing things, which fosters an attitude of letting go and accepting life as it comes. Interestingly, *Rabaris* are often known for wearing beautiful, heavy silver jewellery - often highlighted as the way they carry their money.

Willingness

When asked whether *Rabaris* are forced to move or willing to live a semi-nomadic life; further, if they have any sense of willingness to stay in temporary dwellings, young women responded that they are not willing, citing reasons such as lack of privacy, discomfort, unfamiliarity with this way of life, and feelings of insecurity. Men, however, explained that there is no question of ‘willingness’ in this context; rather, migration and living in temporary arrangements are seen as necessities tied to their way of life and livelihood.

Health

When asked whether *Rabari* sheep breeders feel healthy while on the move, it was reported that children below the age of four often fell ill due to seasonal changes. Interestingly, women reported feeling healthier at campsites, mentioning that they tend to fall sick more often when back in their permanent homes. The reason could not be ascertained. Men, however, spent most of their time outdoors, leaving the campsite in the morning and returning in the evening. According to them, since they remained under open sky for long hours, they were more prone to illness. Conversely, they believed they were under a form of divine protection while working outdoors in the temporary settlements.

Familiarity - kinship system

When asked whether *Rabari* sheep breeders’ neighbours travel along with them, they explained that *Vagadiya* and *Sorathiya Rabaris* form a strong community, often migrating with their family, extended family, and neighbors from the same clan. They emphasized that such social groups provided a strong sense of shared identity and support, creating feelings of belonging, connection, and familiarity—an experience that is essential for their social and emotional well-being.

Security

When asked whether *Rabari* sheep breeders felt safe and secure within individual households, women shared that they often struggled to balance their need for privacy with social dependence, leading to feelings of both physical and emotional insecurity. They expressed a desire for privacy in activities such as bathing, breastfeeding, and sleeping. Men, on the other hand, described a different kind of insecurity—not feeling physically vulnerable themselves, but carrying a strong protective instinct towards their families and livestock.

Objects of attachment - artefacts

Objects of attachment are inanimate objects with which a person develops a strong emotional connection. Objects can represent aspects of a person’s personality, interests, and memories. Transitional objects like handmade blankets from their loved ones, self-embroidered bags/ water bottles, and personalised lathis for rearing are some objects that were reported to provide comfort and security.

Discussion

In the above findings, we came across the physical and experiential aspects of dwelling through documentation of *Rabari* dwellings in temporary and permanent arrangements. Also, interviews and conversations with them through a lens of different attributes of 'being at home' were also important methods. It was observed that *Rabari* pastoralists try to demarcate layers of territory to feel being at home, i.e., comfort, safety, familiarity, and health. The higher the degree of these, the higher the sense of belongingness to that space is created. To create these experiences, one needs to have a feeling of ownership, possession, control, and personalization of space. These can be achieved by creating territories on the campsite.

The concept of territoriality is explored by various authors and can be classified into different types as per the findings. , *Rabari* pastoralists in this study were observed to create three hierarchical territories on the campsite. Primary territory - these are spaces owned by individuals or primary groups, controlled on a relatively permanent basis by them, and central to their daily lives; Secondary territory is the territory which is not owned by the occupant, but with which the person or group has a more regular or less exclusive control and usage (Altman, 1975), and Peripheral territory is a public space such as a shared sports field, and a city park (Lyman and Scott, 1976). These three territories could be seen on the campsite as explained below.

Primary Territory

The first and most important is the primary territory. These are created by the spaces owned by individuals or primary groups and are controlled centrally daily. It is the most private among the spatial arrangements on campsites. It is achieved by marking the boundary and separating personal and collective spaces. Marking means placing an object or substance in a space to indicate one's territorial intentions. And further personalization in a manner to indicate one's identity. Territorial behavior reflects the desire to inhabit spaces, as well as when needed to defend personal space from outside intrusion. It is also related to the object of attachment.

Secondary/ Supporting Territory

It is often a shared space by a group. Semi-private and semi-public zones, such as spaces between two *Vandhiyas*. It is just an imaginative demarcation of space where people of the two *Vandhiyas*, adjacent to each other, communicate and share things between them. This space also has fencing for livestock. Control of these territories is less essential to them compared to primary territories. These in-between spaces are compared to primary territories. These in-between spaces bring familiarity to people from their collective experience within their neighborhood in the native village. Here also, they are surrounded by the same kinship and try to relive the same connection as well as privacy with each other.

Peripheral Territory

The boundary around the spaces that can be controlled collectively is usually public spaces, but here it is the space for livestock. It has a physical barrier along the periphery, and it can be controlled, i.e., access can be opened or closed according to convenience and needs. This kind of peripheral territory is essential for keeping livestock safe. Farmers often create such zones around their fields using fallow land, indicating that ownership lies with them, while the *Rabaris* are only temporary residents. This territory also acts as a boundary within which the *Rabaris* must manage their livelihoods and temporary dwellings. Additionally, it serves as a defined area where manure is evenly spread across the fallow land. Although the position of dwellings and the spatial arrangement of the campsite change every five days, they always remain within this marked territory.

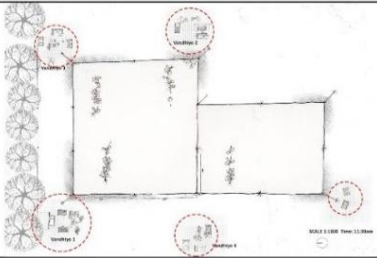
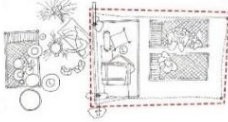
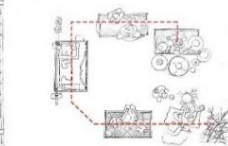
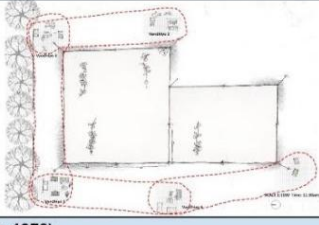
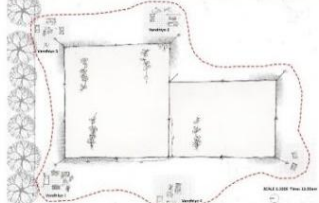
Primary Territory (The Altman System, 1975)					
Sr no	Elements act as regulators of privacy	Function	What is achieved ?	Individual Experiences	How?
1	Charpaya	Ends the boundary of living space	Personalization of space demarcating lines Flexibility	By arranging objects of arrangements familiarity	
2	Poles set up and temporary shade	Ends the boundary of vandhiya	Possess ownership	Comfort, Safety and health	
3	Firewood placement, bags	Ends the boundary of Kitchen	Control	Lettingbeness	
Supporting Territory (The Altman System, 1975)					
1	Indetween spaces of two vandhiyas	Spaces along fencing boundary of livestock	Public-private	Familiarity	
Peripheral Territory (The Layman and Scott System, 1976)					
1	Fencing and pole	Physical boundary	Creating boundary for only animals (livestock)	Safety, protection	

Fig. 9: Table shows how various levels of territoriality is achieved on the campsite by the spatial arrangement of *vandhiyas* on site.

Source: Author

Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that the *Rabaris* are not only established in their permanent village settlements but also attempt a sense of familiarity and ‘being at home’ in the temporary campsites during migration. The spaces organized on the campsite are defined, ordered, and imbued with meaning. At the migratory campsites, open land is systematically transformed into a recognizable settlement. Families replicate elements of their permanent home activities by creating visible and invisible boundaries that separate functions such as cooking, livestock care, and resting. These divisions reflect cultural patterns associated with household organization and gender-age-based responsibilities. Each nuclear family establishes a distinct territory, thereby defining its dwelling space within the wider campsite. This settlement on the campsite is further characterized by the demarcation of boundaries and layers of territories. These distinguish living areas from occupational activities, which fosters both safety and comfort. Primary territory is the individual shelter with *khatlas*, household objects and shaded areas,

secondary was the shared space for animals created amidst the *vandhiyas* and the tertiary one was the periphery of the camp formed by the *vandhiyas* along with the *wadas* within a larger parcel of fallow land. Although, *Rabaris* do not legally own the land they occupy, they develop a temporary sense of ownership and control during their stay. Occupation of space generates a sense of possession, prompting families to defend personal, collective, and animal-related territories. The arrangement of objects—using the minimal goods carried during migration—serves to mark and personalize these spaces, reinforcing attachment and belonging.

The study concludes that for the *Rabaris*, dwelling within a semi-nomadic context emerges from the relational practices of possessing, occupying, and territorializing space. By continuously reproducing familiar spatial arrangements and personalizing temporary shelters, *Rabaris* can establish a sense of ‘home’ across shifting landscapes. Nonetheless, the kinship system is also important in offering familiarity and security, important to create a sense of home. Here too, exist the under-currents of gender and social status dynamics within the family and kinship systems.

This research deploys ethnographic attention to both permanent and temporary dwelling practices, which illuminates how continuity of spatial order provides stability and belongingness despite mobility. This documentation of sheep-breeder *Rabari* campsite arrangements explores the notion of dwelling therein. It contributes to the study of vernacular settlements by foregrounding non-sedentary forms of dwelling. Nevertheless, the research is limited by its case-study scope. The findings are specific to a small number of sheep-breeding *Rabari* households from Kutch, India, and may not be generalizable across other pastoralist communities. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on spatial and experiential aspects. Broader social, symbolic, and economic dimensions of dwelling could further enrich the body of knowledge about semi-nomadic households. Future research could extend these findings by examining such dimensions in greater depth and across a wider range of pastoralist contexts.

Acknowledgement

We extend our sincere gratitude to Dr. Poshak Patel, Deputy Director of Animal Husbandry, Government of Gujarat, and Registrar, Gujarat Veterinary Council, Gandhinagar, for his valuable guidance and support. We are deeply thankful to Dr. Solanki, sheep veterinarian with GUSHEEL (Gujarat Sheep & Wool Development Corporation Limited), based in Bhuj and currently posted at Patan, for his expertise and encouragement throughout the study. Our heartfelt thanks are also due to Neetaben from MARAG (Maaldhari Rural Action Group) for her insightful contributions.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Ethical Considerations: All participants were adults and engaged voluntarily. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, with clear explanation of the study’s objectives. No identifying information has been disclosed, and pseudonyms were used in reporting. The study involved non-vulnerable populations and non-invasive methods; therefore, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance was not required as per institutional policy.

Data Availability: The data can be provided upon a formal request to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Ahmed, S. (1999). Home and away: Narratives of migration and estrangement. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(3)329–347
- Arjjumend, H. (2018). Review of Pastoralists’ Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Change: Can Technology Help Pastoralists Mitigate the Risks? *International Journal of Bio-resource and Stress Management*, 9(1)118-128.

- Altman, I. (1975) *The environment and social behavior: privacy, personal space, territory, crowding*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Bronowski, J. (1973) *The ascent of man*. London: BBC Enterprises.
- Choksi, A. & Dyer, C. (1996) *Pastoralism in a changing world: Patterns of adaptation among the Rabaris of Kutch, Gujarat*. Manchester: University of Manchester.
- Cribb, R. (1991) *Nomads in archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giuliani, M. V. (1991) Towards an analysis of mental representations of attachment to the home. In Altman, I. & Low, S. (eds.), *Place attachment*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Hatfield, R. & Davies, J. (2006) *Pastoralism as a percentage of agricultural GDP*. Nairobi: International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
- Heidegger, M. (1966) *Conversations on a Country Path* (in *Discourse on Thinking*, J.M. Anderson & E.H. Freund, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Hummon, D.M. (1993) *A Place to Call Home: Identification with Dwelling, Community and Region*. Wellesley: Department of Sociology, Wellesley College
- Ingold, T. (1980) *Hunters, pastoralists and ranchers: Reindeer economies and their transformations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2000) *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.
- Köhler-Rollefson, I. (1992) Pastoralism in western India from a comparative perspective: Some comments. London: International Institute for Environment and Development, Drylands Networks Programme, Issues Paper No. 36.
- Lyman, S. & Scott, M. (1967) *Territoriality: A neglected sociological dimension*. *Social Problems*, 15(2), 236-249
- Norberg-Schulz, C. (1985) *The concept of dwelling: On the way to figurative architecture*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications.
- Oliver, P. (1987) *Dwellings: The house across the world*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Oliver, P. (2006) *Built to Meet Needs: Cultural Issues in Vernacular Architecture*. UK: Elsevier
- Priyanka (2022) Acculturation and local dominance: A study in the context of Rabaris of Gujarat. *Social Science Journal for Advanced Research*, Vol. 2(6): pp. [not provided]
- Rangnekar, D. V. (1993) Observation on pastoralism in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan. In *Pastoralism and pastoral migration in Gujarat*. Anand: Institute of Rural Management.
- Rapoport, A. (1969) *House form and culture*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Rudofsky, B. (1964) *Architecture without architects*. New York: Doubleday.
- Todres, L. & Galvin, K. (2010) "Dwelling-mobility": An existential theory of well-being. *Humanistic Psychologist*, 38(1)33–53