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Toponymic Classification of Settlements in Nandurbar District of Maharashtra: A geographical Study of Village Place Names

Dr. Manohar B. Patil

Abstract

Names of places (toponyms) show important geographical, historical, linguistic and cultural characteristics of a region. This paper explores semantic and morphological classification of settlement names of Nandurbar district, Maharashtra. Covering 928 settlements distributed in six tehsils (i.e. administrative sub-divisions) viz. Akkalkuwa, Akrani, Talode, Shahade, Nandurbar and Nawapur, the study used Census of India 2011, District Census Handbook, Maharashtra State Data Bank and other official records. Taking a descriptive and analytical approach, the names of villages were classified into semantic and morphological categories. In semantic classification, seven major categories were formed. Among them habitation-generic and local tribal (root) names formed the largest (32.54 %) group, followed by (20.04 %) phytonymic (plant names) and (14.22 %) physiographic (relief) names. In morphological classification, 13 major categories were formed, and root (or uncompounded) names accounted for 59.91 % of the total toponyms. There were considerable variations in naming patterns at tehsil level, particularly concentration of toponyms related to vegetation and water in Akkalkuwa, and tribal (pada/padar) habitation in Nawapur. The study revealed that settlement names display the relation between geographical environment and cultural identity of the region and also trace historical processes. The study highlights importance of toponymic classification to appreciate regional geographical features and document cultural heritage of communities.

Keywords: *Toponymy, Semantic Classification, Morphological Classification, Village Place Names.*

Introduction

Studies of place names or toponyms offer valuable insight into the historical, cultural, social, economic and physical elements of a region (Sari & Çakir, 2023). The field of toponymy is an interdisciplinary science that focuses on various aspects of onomastics and geography (Baruadi et al., 2023). The study of place names is important in geography because it allows for the interpretation of the intersection of environment and culture and the impacts that various societies have had on the environment (Li et al., 2025). Names of villages and settlements provide information on the local environment, history and culture of a region (Baruadi et al., 2023). The naming of settlements reflects the vegetation and conditions of the land at the time, along with environmental and socio-cultural constraints of the time and place. Features like rivers, forests and valleys (along with lakes, ponds, etc.) have particularly influenced place names, as have other traditional occupations and environments. Over the years, settlements have changed due to social, political and economic transformations (Hui-min et al., 2025). Considering village toponyms helps explain geographical and cultural influences as well as the variations in place names.

Due to its linguistic, cultural, ethnic and environmental diversity, India is an ideal place for toponymic studies. The names of Indian villages indicate the regional languages, customs and traditions, historical events, religious practices and ecological conditions of the area (Chen et al., 2024). Maharashtra, a western state of India, has a variety of landscapes and cultures- from the Western Ghats, the Deccan Plateau, to the river valleys, upland forested and other rural settlements. The study of toponyms of settlements reflects variations in cultural identity, settlement history and the interactions of different communities with their environment. Nandurbar district in north-western Maharashtra has the potential for similar studies. The district has a variety of physiography, including the Satpura ranges, hilly and forested landscapes, river valleys and plains, and agrarian landscapes. From the socio-cultural perspective, the district has indigenous communities and tribal populations. Different conditions and means of livelihood of the people have influenced the settlement pattern of the area. The interactions of the various conditions, their locations and settlements have been influenced by the social practices and linguistic traditions of the people.

Natural geographic features strongly influence the name of settlements within the Nandurbar District. The district possesses varied physical features, including mountains, dense forests, and large water bodies. These impact settlement and place-name formation (Patil et al., 2023).

Similar tendencies in Nandurbar are echoed in other regions such as the Special Region of Yogyakarta, whereby ecological features, especially rivers and mountains, predominantly impact toponyms (Amrina et al., 2026). In Nandurbar, the presence of hilly areas and forests, especially in the tehsils of Akkalkuwa and Akrani, reflect the influence of natural features in the physical environment on the naming of settlements. This observation is similar to findings in Daund Tahsil in the Pune District, where the settlements are named after natural features, especially mountains, rivers, and water bodies (Baban, 2026). These naming conventions may guide planners, policy makers, and stakeholders to consider the importance of natural and cultural heritage in regional planning.

As an example, using toponymic analysis in planning processes can help implement sustainable development in a way that natural resources and eco-tourism potential are incorporated in the district's strategies and plans (Amrina et al., 2026). To promote the distinctive landscapes and cultural heritage of the district, eco-tourism can also be developed based on place names (Setyo et al., 2022). Balanced development and the preservation of the district's identity and heritage can be achieved through the integration of toponymic analysis in different levels of regional planning.

Place names of villages in Nandurbar district are situated geographically at the periphery to define and illustrate the factors embedded in the naming process. Integrating toponymic analysis in the different levels of regional planning can help identify socio-economic distinctions. The linguistic patterns and the socio-cultural and environmental diversity of place names in settlements in Nandurbar district can be instruments to substantiate and document regional heritage. Classification of settlements based on the mnemonics embedded in their names can help to distinguish nomenclatural characteristics.

Situated in north-western Maharashtra, Nandurbar district comprises six tehsils, i.e. Nandurbar, Shahada, Taloda, Navapur, Akkalkuwa and Akrani (Dhadgaon) between 20°59′45″ to 22°01′47″ North latitudes and 73°34′33″ to 74°46′16″ East longitudes. It borders Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra's Dhule district. The physiographic units of the district, the Satpura hills and undulating plateaus, valleys and river plains, influence the population settlement, distribution and infrastructure of the district. The present study endeavors to analyze and classify systematically the place names of Nandurbar district. It discusses the dominant categories of village toponyms, their distribution and variations and the geographical, environmental, historic and socio-cultural setting. It interprets the reasons for naming. Using a comparative geographical approach, it correlates the village toponyms with the regional situations and documents Nandurbar's cultural landscape.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine the geographical characteristics of settlement names in Nandurbar district, Maharashtra. The specific objectives are:

1. To classify settlement names based on their semantic and morphological characteristics.
2. To identify the geographical, environmental, historical and socio-cultural factors associated with village place names.
3. To analyse the tehsil-wise distribution and spatial variations of different toponymic categories.
4. To examine the morphological structure and habitation-related suffixes of settlement names.
5. To understand the relationship between village toponyms and the geographical and cultural characteristics of Nandurbar district.

Methodology and Database

The present study is based on a descriptive and analytical geographical approach to examine the semantic and morphological characteristics of settlement names in Nandurbar district of Maharashtra. The study covers six tehsils, namely Akkalkuwa, Akrani, Talode, Shahade, Nandurbar and Nawapur, comprising 928 inhabited villages as considered in the study database. The village-wise names and administrative details were primarily collected from the Census of India 2011, District Census Handbook of Nandurbar, Part A (Village and Town Directory), published by the Directorate of Census Operations, Maharashtra, and supplemented by official district administrative records and the Government of Maharashtra State Data Bank.

The collected village names were examined and classified into two major categories: semantic toponymic classification, based on their geographical, environmental, historical, linguistic and socio-cultural associations, and morphological classification, based on root forms and habitation-related suffixes such as *-pur*, *-pada*, *-wada*, *-gaon* and *-kheda*. The classified data were tabulated according to tehsil, and numerical and percentage distributions were calculated to identify regional variations. Geographical and linguistic interpretations were used to understand the relationship between village nomenclature, physical environment and cultural traditions. The study primarily uses secondary data supported by geographical interpretation and, wherever available, local historical and linguistic information.

Sources of Database:

1. Directorate of Census Operations, Maharashtra (2014), *District Census Handbook: Nandurbar, Census of India 2011, Part A – Village and Town Directory*.
2. Government of Maharashtra, *Maharashtra State Data Bank – Nandurbar District*.
3. District Administration, Nandurbar, *District Profile and Administrative Information*.

Results and Discussion

The present study examines the semantic and morphological characteristics of 928 inhabited villages of six tehsils of Nandurbar district. The classification explores the connection between the names of villages and their geographical, environmental, historical, linguistic and social and cultural contexts. The results are presented under two main headings: classification of toponymic, that is, semantic classification; and morphological classification.

Semantic Toponymic Classification

Semantic classification of village names is shown in Table 1. The results show that habitation-generic and local tribal-root names constitute the largest class, comprising 302 (32.54%) villages. This class is followed by phytonymic names (186; 20.04%), physiographic and geomorphic names (132; 14.22%), and historical, anthroponymic and community related names

(121; 13.04%). Hydrographic names comprise 72 villages (7.76%), socio-cultural and religious names 58 (6.25%), and zoonymic names 57 (6.14%).

Table 1 Semantic Toponymic Classification of Settlements Across Tehsils in the Nandurbar district

Semantic Toponymic Category	Akkalkuwa	Akrani	Talode	Shahade	Nandurbar	Nawapur	District Total	District Share (%)
Habitation-Generic / Local Tribal Roots	24	37	35	79	76	51	302	32.54
Phytonymic (Flora & Vegetation)	53	37	12	28	22	34	186	20.04
Physiographic & Geomorphic (Terrain & Soil)	34	32	12	18	9	27	132	14.22
Historical, Anthroponymic & Community	29	26	13	28	12	13	121	13.04
Hydrographic (Water & Springs)	29	15	6	5	4	13	72	7.76
Socio-Cultural, Religious & Mythological	10	8	10	10	14	6	58	6.25
Zoonymic (Fauna & Wildlife)	10	7	4	12	12	12	57	6.14
Total Inhabited Villages (n)	**189**	**162**	**92**	**180**	**149**	**156**	**928**	**100.00**

(Source: Compiled and classified from village-name data.)

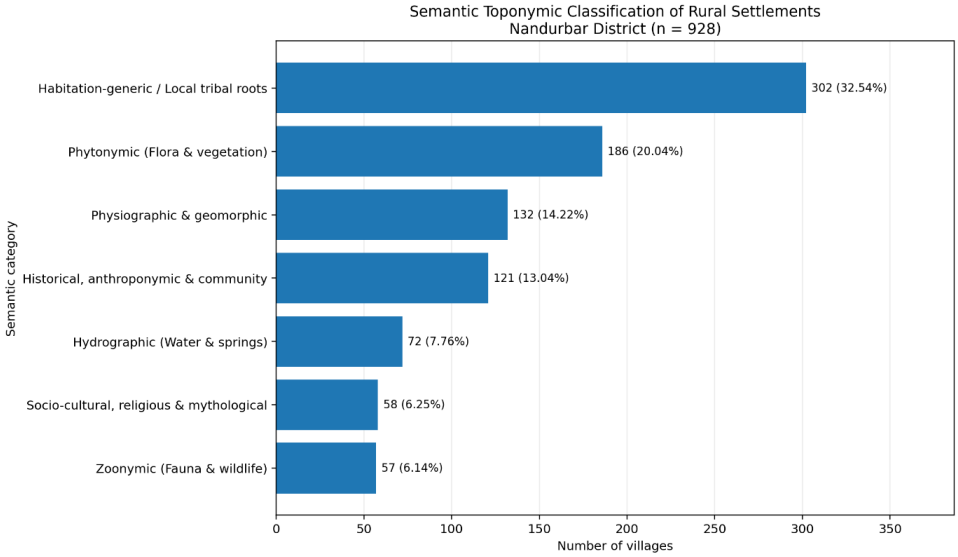

Figure 1 District-wise Percentage Distribution of Semantic Toponymic Categories.

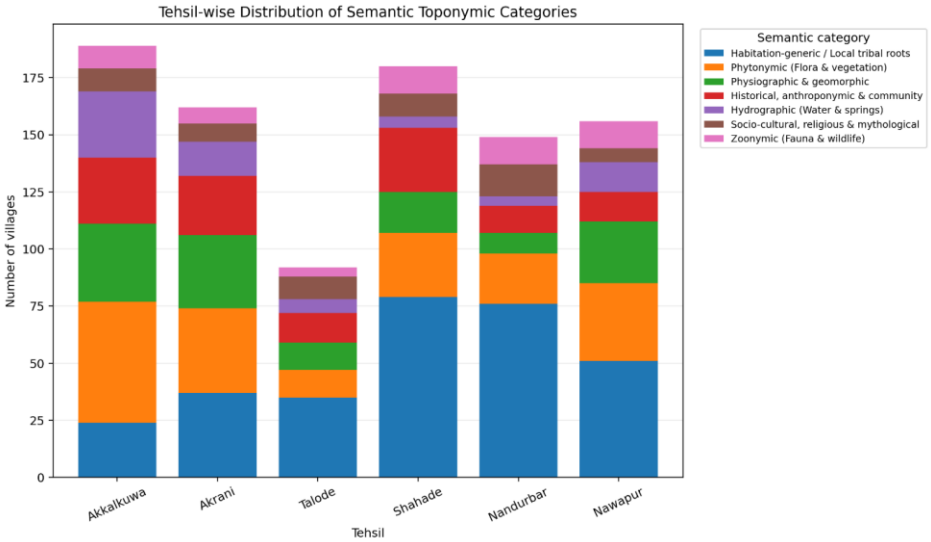

Figure 2 Tehsil-wise Distribution of Semantic Toponymic Categories.

Analysis at the Tehsil level reflects considerable variation. Shahade and Nandurbar recorded the highest numbers of habitation generic and local tribal root names (79 and 76, respectively). Akkalkuwa recorded the highest numbers of phytonymic (53), physiographic (34) and hydrographic (29) names. Traditional patterns of habitation, flora and fauna and the

physical landscape and water resources of the area influence settlement nomenclature. The semantic classification of village names shows that the Nandurbar district has rich resources of the natural environment, indigenous traditions, and historical processes that contributed to the development and cultural identities of communities.

Morphological and Habitation Suffix Classification

Morphological Classification of Village Names is in Table 2. It is based on structural composition and habitation related suffixes. The analysis identified 13 categories in the six tehsils. The major category consists of uncompounded or root only toponyms, which make up 556 villages (59.91%). The second largest category consists of town or settlement names ending with -pur/-puri, which consist of 66 villages (7.11%). Suffixed names of tribal hamlets ending in -pada/-padar, consist of 54 villages (5.82%), and settled place suffixes of -wada/-wade/-wad, consist of 45 villages (4.85%).

Hydro-toponymic suffixes consist of 43 villages (4.63%), and -gaon comprises 32 villages (3.45%). Other suffixes consist of -gachi and -karan of pastoral names of sloping terrain (3.23%); phytonymic suffixes (3.13%); small agrarian hamlets (2.80%) and topographic suffixes (2.69%). The remaining suffixes, that is -nagar, -fali/-phali and fort-related suffixes, comprise relatively small numbers. Variation in terminology occurs in Tehsil Shahade, which has the highest number of root only names (122), while Nawapur has the highest number of -pada/-padar names (27). Relatively a higher number of hydro-toponymic suffixes, are found in Akkalkuwa (25), and -pur/-puri are found relatively more in Shahade and Talode. These variations indicate differences in regional naming patterns.

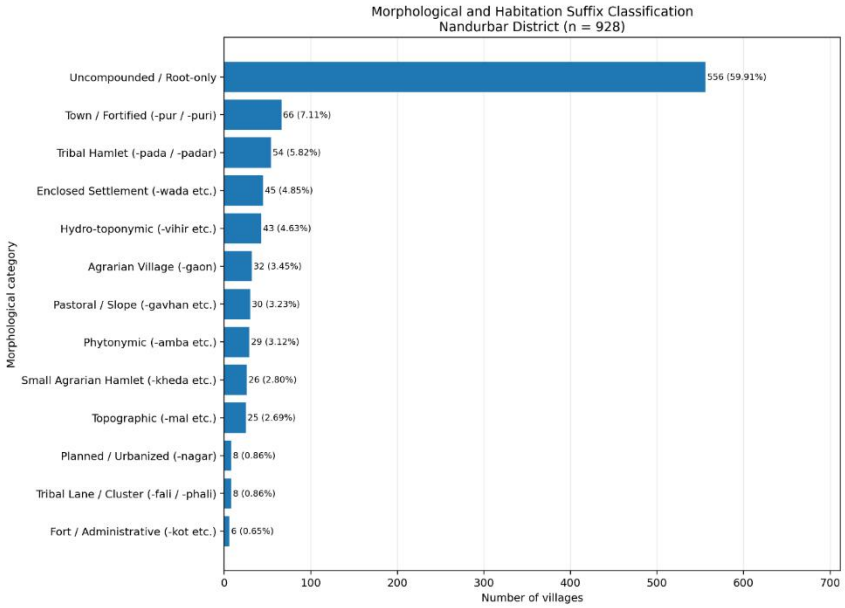

Figure 3 District-wise Percentage Distribution of Morphological and Habitation Suffix Classification.

Table 2 Morphological & Habitation Suffix Classification of Settlements Across Tehsils of Nandurbar District

Morphological Suffix Class	Indicative Terminations	Akkalkuwa	Akrani	Talode	Shahade	Nandurbar	Nawapur	District Total	District Share
Uncompounded / Root-only Toponyms	*Root forms without standard habitation suffix*	92	106	46	122	105	85	556	59.91
Town / Fortified Settlement (-pur / -puri)	*-pur, -puri*	11	0	16	17	14	8	66	7.11
Tribal Hamlet (-pada / -padar)	*-pada, -padar*	15	1	9	0	2	27	54	5.82
Enclosed Settlement / Ward (-wada / -wade / -wad)	*-wada, -wadi, -wade, -wad*	2	9	6	12	11	5	45	4.85
Hydro-toponymic Suffix (-vihir / -pani / -kund / -khadi)	*-vihir, -pani, -kund, -khadi, -ziri*	25	5	2	1	0	10	43	4.63
Agrarian Village (-gaon)	*-gaon*	3	5	3	7	9	5	32	3.45
Pastoral / Slope Settlement (-gavhan / -pati / -bari)	*-gavhan, -pati, -bara, -bari*	12	8	4	1	2	3	30	3.23
Phytonymic Suffix (-amba / -pimpal / -bor / -mahu)	*-amba, -pimpal, -bor, -mahu, -umbar*	13	10	0	2	2	2	29	3.13

Small Agrarian Hamlet (-kheda / -khedi)	*-kheda, -khedi, -khede*	1	9	0	13	3	0	26	2.80
Topographic Suffix (-mal / -bardi / -khadak)	*-mal, -bardi, -dongri, -khadak*	8	9	2	1	0	5	25	2.69
Planned / Urbanized Settlement (-nagar)	*-nagar*	1	0	3	2	1	1	8	0.86
Tribal Lane / Cluster (-fali / -phali)	*-fali, -phali*	5	0	0	0	0	3	8	0.86
Fort / Administrative Outpost (-kot / -gad / -thana)	*-kot, -gad, -thana, -chouki*	1	0	1	2	0	2	6	0.65
Total Inhabited Villages (n)	—	**189**	**162**	**92**	**180**	**149**	**156**	**928**	**100.00**

(Source: Compiled and classified from village-name data.)

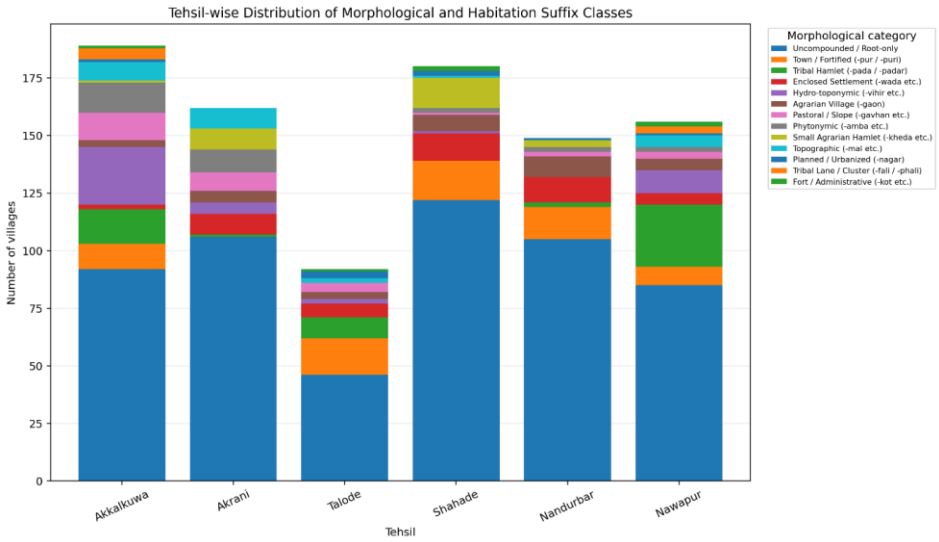

Figure 4 Tehsil-wise Distribution of Morphological and Habitation Suffix Classification.

Comparative Geographical Interpretation

The results of both the semantic and the morphological classification of place-names show that the different kinds of locations in the Nandurbar district have distinctive characteristics. The prevalence of local tribal names within the local populations reflects the importance of local linguistic traditions and habits of natural settlement. The presence of phytonymic and physiographic names within the sample indicates some influence of vegetation and the environment on the practice of settlement naming.

Of the eight tehsils, Akkalkuwa and Akrani have stronger environmental names, especially of a floral and geographic nature. In contrast, a relatively higher presence of habitation-generic names is found in Shahade and Nandurbar. Tehsil Nawapur has a relatively high occurrence of the settlement suffixes of -pada/-padar. Morphological classification shows that across the six tehsils, root only names are predominant, showing persistence of old place-name structures. The variation in settlement suffixes like -pur, -pada, -wada, -gaon and -kheda indicates variation in settlements in the different regions.

Major Findings

The major findings of the study are:

1. Generic and local tribal-root names constitute 32.54% of the total villages, and form the major class in the semantic classification.
2. Phytonymic names constitute 20.04% of the total villages, showing the importance of vegetation in naming.
3. Names of physiographic and geomorphic features constitute 14.22% of the total villages, showing the importance of the physical features of the landscape.
4. Root-only toponyms account for 59.91% of the total villages in the morphological classification.
5. Akkalkuwa has comparatively a greater number of vegetation- and water-related naming patterns.
6. Nawapur has the highest number of tribal hamlet suffixes (-pada / -padar).
7. Depending upon the regions / tehsils, considerable variations exist, which is evidence for the regional differences in the environment, language and culture.

Discussion

The classification of settlements in Nandurbar district based on toponymy has revealed the interrelationships of geographical environment, indigenous linguistic tradition, historical processes and socio-cultural aspects. The analysis of 928 inhabited settlements establishes that settlement names are not geographical tags; they encompass the historical and cultural identities of communities. The preponderance of habitation-generic and local tribal names (32.54%) demonstrates the significance of local terminology and indigenous linguistic expressions in the settlement nomenclature of the district. This reveals the local culture's role in sustaining the identity of settlements.

Of interest is the relatively high occurrence of phytonymic names (20.04%). This is presumably due to dependence on local trees and forests for subsistence and other needs. The high frequency of these names in Akkalkuwa and Akrani Tehsils may perhaps be due to the presence of hilly and forested areas in these tehsils. Names influenced by physiography and geomorphology (14.22%) indicate the presence of settlements influenced by the surrounding hills, valleys and other physiographic features. Overall, the analysis reveals that the geographical environment played a dominant role in the identification of settlements in the study area.

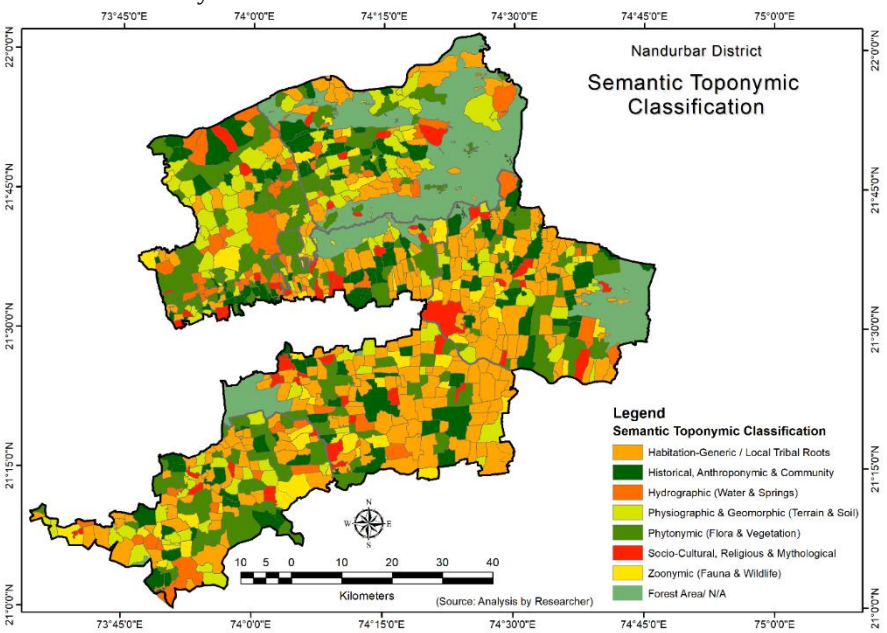

Figure 5 Spatial Distribution of Semantic Toponymic Classification.

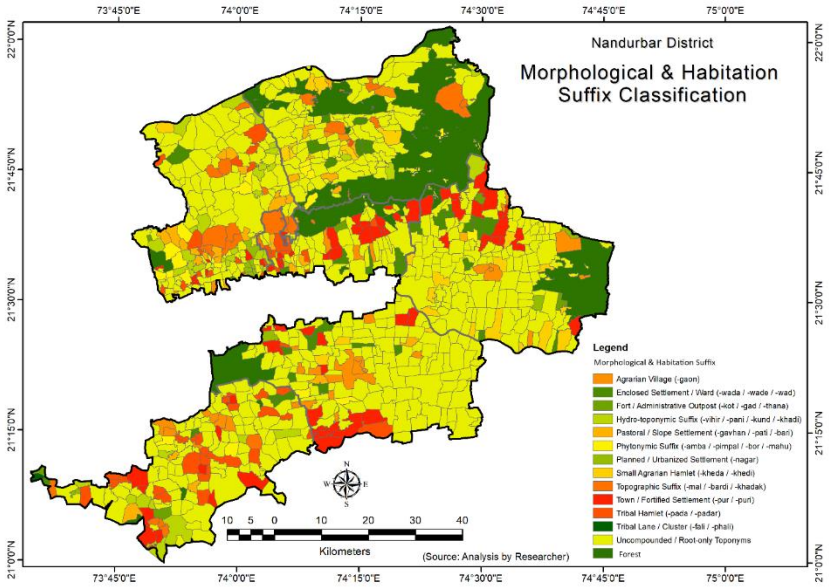

Figure 6 Spatial Distribution of Morphological and Habitation Suffix Classification.

Historical, anthroponymic and community-related names constitute 13.04% of the total village names. The names indicate historical/traditional leaders and community members as well as other personalities have participated in coining village names. Hydrographic names (7.76%) show the role of water bodies in traditional settlement location determination. Other names (6.25%), reflect different socio-cultural, religious and mythological beliefs. Zoonymic names (6.14%) show the impact of the local wildlife in place naming.

Morphological classification shows that the majority (59.91%) of the names have no compound elements and therefore considered to be root-only toponyms. This shows the dominance of root-only names among the village names. The names containing the suffixes -pur, -pada, -wada, -gaon and -kheda indicate the presence of the diverse traditional settlement terms in the region and different names used to indicate the same type of settlement. Concentration of -pada/-padar village names in Nawapur and presence of hydro-toponymic suffixes in Akkalkuwa reflect variation in names structures in different tehsils of the district.

A key observation is that semantic and morphological classifications of settlement names provide complementary perspectives. Semantic classification focuses on the possible geographical and cultural associations of place names, and morphological classification looks at the linguistic structure of names. By combining the two, we get a fuller understanding of the settlement names and the geographical characteristics of the region.

The results show that toponyms in the Nandurbar district retain information pertaining to prevailing environmental conditions, indigenous traditions, historical processes and cultural landscapes. The changes that are evident across the six tehsils show that settlement naming patterns differ across regions. It is important to document village names and their locations in the context of relevant geography, as this would facilitate important contributions to regional geography, cultural heritage and the study of historical human-environment interactions. Before firm conclusions can be made, historical sources must be analyzed, combined with local knowledge and cross-verified in the field.

Conclusion

The present work analyzes 928 settlements from six tehsils of Nandurbar district, Maharashtra, for semantic and morphological analysis. The study recorded several variants of village names due to influence of geographical environment, vegetation, native language, historical conditions and social behaviors of people. Names denoting habitation and local tribal residences (32.54%) were the most common, followed by phytonymic (20.04%), and physiographic names (14.22%). From the morphological analysis, the uncompounded or simple toponyms (59.91%) were the most prevalent. Region specific differences were recorded from the tehsil wise analysis. For example, in Akkalkuwa tehsil, most of the village names were derived from vegetation and water. -pada/-padar (which means place/area) suffix was dominating in Nawapur tehsil. The analysis of the village names revealed that names of villages represent the geographical and cultural conditions of that region. The classification and documentation of village names is important to understand the past and existing settlement conditions of a region.

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Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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