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Editorials 1.1

Foreword by Editorial Advisor



Pratap Kumar Penumala (Emeritus Professor), University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

It gives me great pleasure to write this rather modest foreword to a very bold and beautiful collection of papers, book reviews, biographies, and book blurbs. The present issue has brought together folklore, ecology, endangered wildlife, gender and lives of marginalized fishermen and their proverbs. Alongside this, the beautiful biographies of indigenous folk artist from Bengal, Gurupada Chitrakar, and several biographies of the sociologist, and activist, Gail Omvedt, who sacrificed her life for the cause of the marginalized peoples of India are at once inspiring and educational. The three books that have been profiled through a generous description of the contents dealing with Dalits, Caste, folktales, and legends of India is a useful section that has been devised by the editor, Dr. Dandekar, to bring attention to themes that are of great importance not only to academic discussions and debates, but also for social transformation. The editor's interview with Chad Bauman is a very interesting addition that sheds light on

the nature of politics in India in dealing with the question of minorities. Overall, the issue is very well woven together that captures the current state of affairs in both academic discussions and also in normal conversations on India. I wish to thank Dr. Dandekar (editor-in-chief) and Dr. Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai (guest editor) for their painstaking efforts in putting together this issue. My sincere thanks also to the contributors for their thought provoking papers, reviews, and book descriptions. I am sure that scholars will find this issue eminently fruitful and enjoyable.

Editorial 1.2

Editorial Preface



Deepra Dandekar, Leibniz-ZMO Berlin.

We have resurfaced as promised! We hope you will enjoy our new Nidān December 2021 issue that contains a diverse range of articles exploring human-mediated, human-animal interactions, or the Anthropocene as we know it, through the

medium of Indian folklore. As pointed out by our guest editor Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai, the articles of this issue are original, and all authored by women, focusing on Maharashtra (the Konkan coast), and the North-eastern states of Assam and Manipur. Our contributing scholars have proved adventurous, bold, and assertive in their scholarly outlook, and it has been a great pleasure to work with Anouska Tamuli, Sophia Lisam, Pranita Harad, and Anuja Patwardhan. Lopamudra has been a constant guide throughout this process of steering Nidān through submission procedures, and all the relentless reviewing and editing deadlines. This volume would have been impossible without her confident and efficient editorial presence. Pratap has remained my *guru* – a steadying, calm, and soothing presence of good-humoured encouragement and experience, ever prepared to help and listen. We thank our reviewers as well, without whose support and expertise, the editorial team could not have done justice to such a diverse range of submissions.

Apart from the articles and the in-depth book reviews that sport short interviews with authors – we have a review interview of Chad Bauman's excellent monograph on anti-Christian violence in India this time; we have some additional features in this December issue. In a book presentations section, we invited scholars to present, in as creative a manner, a summary of their own, newly published monographs. Writing academic books is hard, but it is also enthralling. Getting these read, appreciated, and reviewed however, constitutes a separate venture. Being academics ourselves, and having deliberately kept away from corporate publishing in a move to hopefully provide our contributors with more creativity, flexibility, and freedom; we wanted authors to have more agency in presenting

their own work, and sharing their underlying vision with readers. The small interviews that accompany our book reviews serve a similar purpose – of providing our authors more agency. In this vein, we have Joel Lee's presentation of his new monograph *Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion* published out of Cambridge University Press in 2021, Jon Keune's presentation of *Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India* published out of Oxford University Press in 2021, and Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai, our own guest editor's presentation of *The Owl Delivered the Good News all Night Long: Folk Tales, Legends, and Modern Lore of India* published out of Aleph Book Company (Rupa Publications) in 2021. Nidān hopes to continue working with authors, and we invite scholars who want to creatively share their new work and vision with our readers, and to possibly get their books reviewed by us, to contact us.

From this December issue, Nidān has also introduced a section, specifically devoted to biographies. We are interested in the biographies of all those who have made significant contributions to the field of Indian religion, culture, art, anthropology, and history. As part of this new venture, we have Frank Korom's lilting obituary biography of Gurupada Chitrakar, a folk artist from Bengal who recently passed away, while the other set of biography essays concern Gail Omvedt, a sterling veteran of Dalit studies in Maharashtra who also recently passed away. In an unprecedented move, this issue includes four obituary essays about Gail, each more sensitive than the next. Though the original idea was to have one essay obituary, the emotional outpouring that Gail's death generated made it impossible for us to develop criteria for inclusions and exclusions. Being what we are at Nidān –

flexible when prioritizing creativity and excellence, we included all four obituary essays. While V. Geetha has provided us with an introspective, deeply intellectual, and beautifully-worded, scholarly piece, Kamalakar Bhat, Neelima Bandellu, and Mir Suhail have written equally thought-provoking obituaries, with Neelima Bandellu's obituary standing out as a loving, personal account, straight from the grassroots – an emotional ode. However, although obituaries have taken a precedence in the biography section this time, Nidān does not necessarily insist on obituaries. We are interested in all varieties of biographical essays pertaining to a range of scholarly interests, and we invite contributors to send us biographies of scholars, activists, poets, artists, folk narrators, singers, or writers, who may have contributed to the field of Indian Studies. I hope our readers will enjoy these new additions, along with the usual features.

I end here with the by-now, almost mandatory paragraph on the Coronavirus pandemic. Another Covid year full of insecurities, restrictions, and instabilities bites the dust, and we can only hope to gradually move forward from this crisis in the next year. Hope is a powerful emotion, even if the past two years have made us cynical. But yet, hope is what sustains us, not just as we look into the future, but also while we look to overcome the small challenges of the everyday in the present. We appreciate light only when we are engulfed by periods of darkness – and believe me, from my perspective in Berlin, the effect of winter darkness is not something to be scoffed at! And yet, it is in this period of darkness that we also see the moon and stars (if the sky is not over clouded). The moon and stars sustain us with hope – hope that there is sunshine in the world lurking just beyond the meridian that will

be ours in a matter of time. We look with hope to a brighter future in 2022, and our entire Nidān team that has painstakingly and diligently worked to produce this winter issue of rivers, swamps, tigers, goddesses, and lips smacking fish preparations, take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy holiday season, and a wonderful and safe New Year 2022.

Editorial 1.3

Introduction by Guest Editor: We Rise with Hope for a Better Tomorrow



Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai, Visual anthropologist, researcher, and writer

After completing the July 2021 Nidān issue earlier this year, amidst the terrible difficulties generated by a shocking second wave of Coronavirus that hit the length and breadth of India, followed by innumerable lockdowns, and discontinued communication; we began preparing for the December 2021 issue with some trepidation. But we were pleasantly surprised and relieved to discover how smooth the journey was. To begin with, it was nice to continue working with an old friend and colleague Deepra, who took over as Editor-in-chief

earlier this year, and I am sure that the journal will benefit from her experience and expertise. This journey was made all the more enjoyable with the diligent participation of many young women scholars, who showed eagerness to work with our reviewer's suggestions and the editorial desk. The articles contained in this issue are especially valuable since they are based on original ethnographic research. The papers in this issue discuss the conundrums of ecological conservation in diverse ecological settings across India. Anouska Tamuli discusses the case of biodiversity in Assam in *Living with the River: Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Majuli*, Anuja Patwardhan, along with presenting us with a strong gender analysis in *Mahervashininchya Devi or Deities Presiding over the well-being of Women in Maharashtra*, highlights the importance of directions associated with shrines. Sophia Lisam presents a thought-provoking article on Tiger conservation in Manipur through folk stories in *Critically Endangered in Folklore: Legends of Tigers in Manipur*, while Pranita Harad explores folk sayings and proverbs that tell us about fishermen and their engagement with coastal fisheries in Maharashtra in *Fisheries and Ecology Portrayed in Konkani*.

As we continue on to the new year in 2022, and a new set of issues for Nidān, we do so with the hope for healing the earth. We also take the opportunity of looking back, and stand in silence at the enormous losses this year has brought. This issue remembers some significant names, as we look back at Gurupada Chitrakar's contributions to *patua*, a folk art from Bengal, who succumbed to Covid-related complications earlier this year. We also applaud researcher, scholar, and human-rights activist Gail Omvedt, who passed away this year at

the age of 81. While Gurupada remains a well-known name in Bengal, inspiring many second-generation folk artists, Gail Omvedt, a firebrand academic and activist motivated many who were at the margins of society. She remained a well-known and greatly respected scholar – holding the prestigious Phule-Ambedkar Chair at the University of Pune (Savitribai Phule Pune Vidyapith), and professorial positions at the Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi.

The worries of the year have also taught us to relook at narratives and to understand how sometimes difficult emotional experiences become a part of our collective journey – gleaned from personal lives, but also from the contribution of the many symbols that surround us. These symbols are resonant with other events, and recollections of the past that becomes integrated into a continuous narrativization process that explains, depicts, and represents our present. This journey is complex, especially exemplified with folklore retelling that showcases many voices and identities, stories of migration, displacement, and resettlements that reassess and reinvent itself across time and space. This function has gained salience in the last two years, perhaps because of enforced confinement during the pandemic. It is within these confines, or perhaps due to them that narratives about environment have become significant, leading to the redefinition of lockdown itself. Lockdown in India is no longer limited to the pandemic, but is extended to redefine a state of existence that embroils individual experiences with the collective, especially when responding to natural disaster, evident in New Delhi's recent 'pollution lockdown'. As the lockdowns began in early April 2020, an interesting piece of news

created quite a stir. A story began circulating that, due to lowering pollution, the tip of the Himalayan range could be glimpsed from Jalandhar (Punjab), 200 kms away from the mountains. While environmental critics claimed this massive reduction in pollution to have resulted from a drastic reduction of vehicular pollution and lowered industrial emissions, this impossible claim of suddenly 'seeing' across 200 kms, linked the experience of individuals to collectives in the form of a story that reconstituted geographically and geopolitically unified identities. This news closely followed other stories of endangered animals sighted in different parts of urban India. An interesting list of such animals was reported by the Wall Street online,¹ that included endangered species like Murrah buffaloes, spotted strolling down the road on April 8 in New Delhi, a leopard sighted in Chandigarh and reported on March 30, and an ostentation of peafowls, who apparently left their habitat in the Doongerwadi Forest, to hit the streets of Mumbai in early April.² Various newspaper reports of the time quoted environmentalists saying that nature was perhaps taking her own course, with the reduction of human activity and pollution. On the other hand, as India reeled under the

financial losses of the lockdown, the super cyclone Amphan struck Eastern India – West Bengal, Odisha, and Bangladesh in mid-May 2020, resulting in the death and injury of many hundreds. The destruction this time was even more widespread due to the massive deforestation of the Sundarban mangroves. Such unusual occurrences predicated on the reduction, or the increase of human-ecological interface brings to mind, the many creation stories popular in folklore. Creation stories too, draw attention to the importance of ecology, and the environment – matters that are mostly considered trivial in the face of large-scale industrial growth. And yet, it is at this very juncture of a seemingly-unstoppable industrialization of the Global South, that the pandemic has also struck, applying brakes to the rampant neglect of the ecology, and natural habitat. Perhaps it is through a closer understanding of narratives that focus on ecology, that may assist us in our future task of animal and plant conservation. This current December 2021 issue of Nidān is a rich collection that explores similar questions, giving voice to folklore insights on questions about intangible cultural heritage, and to the importance of oral traditions in the history and anthropology of India.

¹ A list of reported sightings of endangered species of animals from various parts of the world- <https://247wallst.com/special-report/2020/05/12/animals-making-a-comeback-while-humans-are-in-lockdown/>- last accessed- November 16, 2021

² These animals are also reported as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/>- last accessed, November 16, 2021) and they feature amidst their red list.



Article 2.1

Living with the River: Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Majuli

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of the people of Majuli, the world's largest river island located in Assam, India. The river Brahmaputra plays an integral role in shaping its TEK as its hydrodynamics is largely responsible for not only its existence and prosperity but also its gradual obliteration through bank erosion and siltation. Through centuries of observation of and interaction with their environment, the people of Majuli have developed ways of life that are attuned to their ecological realities. However, climate change and the haphazard introduction of flood-resistant technologies are posing new challenges to such age-old adaptive strategies based on indigenous knowledge. One, therefore, observes an attempt on the part of the islanders to modify their ways of life to adapt to this new context. This paper further demonstrates the importance of TEK and the need to acknowledge it while framing development policies.

Keywords: Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Majuli, Brahmaputra, Freshwater Ecosystem, Fluvial Processes.

Introduction

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), an aspect of folklore research (Jacob et al. 2018: 123), is defined by Berkes (1993: 3) as "a culminative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment. Further, TEK is an attribute of societies with historical continuity in resource use practices; by and large, these are non-industrial or less technologically advanced societies, many of them indigenous or tribal." It is "acknowledged as having fundamental importance in the management of local resources, in the husbanding of the world's diversity, and in providing locally valid models for sustainable living" (Turner et al. 2000: 1275). It finds expression through the socio-cultural and economic practices of a community. In Assam, a state located in the north-eastern part of India, such knowledge is seen to be widely in practice in Majuli, the largest river island in the world. A substantial part of their TEK revolves around an understanding of the nature of the rivers they are surrounded by,

namely, the Brahmaputra to the south and the Subansiri to the north, and the kind of geomorphology and ecology they give rise to. The application of TEK, here, can be observed most conspicuously in their livelihood practices, housing style, traditional craft and art, practices related to health preservation, and material heritage conservation.

A Brief History of Majuli

At present, Majuli assumes the shape of “an irregular spindle elongated in a northeast-southwest direction” (Dutta et al. 2020). Situated between 26°25′ and 27°12′ north latitude and 93°39′ and 94°35′ east longitude, it is a sub-division of the Jorhat district of Assam. It is bounded by the Subansiri (a tributary of the Brahmaputra) in the north and the Brahmaputra in the south. Its western extremity is marked by the point where the Subansiri and the Brahmaputra meet at a place called Lakhaw and towards the east, it is bounded by a stream called the Kherkatiya Suti which used to be the erstwhile channel of the Brahmaputra (Nath 2009: 5). But this has not always been the geography of the region. With time, there have been several geological events such as earthquakes and floods that have given Majuli its present shape. Like all TEK, that of Majuli too has been conceived in its unique ecosystem. It is, therefore, important to understand the various geological processes that led to its formation and by extension, its ecosystem. Although there are no direct records that provide us with such details it is possible to develop a hypothesis based on oral traditions and literary accounts such as the accounts of travellers and biographers and *buranjis*¹ (Nath 2009: 7). Gait (1926: 133) one of the earliest chroniclers of Assam history of the modern period refers to native traditions to note that in the distant past, the Brahmaputra used to flow further north and the river, Subansiri, fell into it at the point where it is met by the Kherkatiya Suti today. Another tributary of the Brahmaputra, the Dikhow flowed almost parallel to the great river until it emptied into it at a place called Kajalimukh (Gait 1926: 133). On the other hand, the tributary, Dihing, met the Brahmaputra at the present point of contact of the latter and the Kherkatiya Suti. Then, probably owing to some geological process, at some point in the past, the Dihing changed its course to join that of the Dikhow causing a large volume of water to flow into the latter’s channel and straightening its course further (Gait 1926: 133, Nath 2009: 13). It assumed the name, Dihing, and the Dikhow became one of its major tributaries (Nath 2006: 14). Its confluence with the Brahmaputra now moved further east to Lakhaw, thereby, creating the present western extremity of the island (Nath 2009: 13). To the east, a small stream of water-maintained contact between the Dihing and the Brahmaputra through the dead mouth of the former (Nath 2009: 13). These processes probably were completed by the 13th century A.D. since literary accounts tell us that when Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty in Assam, followed the course of the Dihing to reach the Brahmaputra and sailed down through it, he reached a place called Habung, a low-lying area affected by regular floods. Scholars identify this place with present-day Majuli (Nath 2009: 7). The final stage of the formation of the

¹ *Buranjis* are historical chronologies commissioned by the Ahom kings or families of stature in Medieval Assam. Initially they were written in the Tai-Ahom language and later on, in Assamese.

island was marked by the Brahmaputra changing its course to fall into the combined channel of the Dihing and the Dikhow through the dead mouth of the Dihing.² This event probably took place after the first half of the 17th century as the biographical works written in the Vaishnavite monasteries, such as the Auniati and the Dakhinpat *satras* (monasteries affiliated to Neo Vaishnavism that is unique to Assam), record, that the Brahmaputra flowed to their north at the time of their establishment (Nath 2009: 19). Now, only major earthquakes accompanied by floods can account for a geological event of such magnitude. Nath (2009: 19) mentions that in the *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, there are references to two such major earthquakes that brought about deluges in Assam. These occurred in 1613 and 1618 of the Saka era, i.e., 1691 A.D. and 1696 A.D. Based on circumstantial evidence, he surmises that it was these two events that made the Brahmaputra change its course and give birth to the Majuli island as it exists today; when the Brahmaputra fell into the Dihing-Dikhow, the eastern boundary of the island was formed by the Kherkatiya Suti, a small stream which marked the earlier channel of the great river.

Not only in the context of geomorphology but culturally too, Majuli has a distinctive identity. It owes much of its cultural uniqueness to Neo Vaishnavism, a socio-religious movement in the 16th century A.D. which brought about a renaissance in Assamese society. It was here that Sankardev, the pioneer of this movement established one of the first *satras* at a place called Belaguri, Dhuwahat, thereby laying the foundation of his religion, *Ek Sarana Dharma*, and winning over his greatest disciple, Madhavdev (Nath 2009: 2-3). Then, in the 17th century A.D., the Ahom king as a means of containing the revolutionary spirit of Neo Vaishnavism chose Majuli to be converted into the core area of this movement due to its geographical remoteness and history. Therefore, as Majuli grew as a centre of Neo Vaishnavism with time, the various art forms (all dedicated to the adulation of Lord Vishnu) that were an integral part of this socio-religious movement, simultaneously took roots, and thereby, made Majuli a hotbed of cultural activities (Nath 2009: 3). Demographically, Majuli is diverse. The Mishing tribe, one of the communities that are well-adapted to floods, forms a major part of the population. Apart from the Mishings there are people from other tribes such as the Deoris and the Sonowal-Kacharis, non-tribal Assamese from various castes, and a few people belonging to other linguistic affiliations such as Bihari and Bengali. But despite their linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences, the entire population abides by the norms of the *satra* institution (Nath 2009: 3-4).

Ecological Background

Since Majuli was essentially born out of the geological actions of the two rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Dihing, it has a rich freshwater ecosystem; it is dotted with water

² It is worth noting that the eastern and northern aquatic boundaries of the island comprised of the Kherkatiya Suti and the Subansiri, respectively, are still known as the *Burha Luit* collectively. *Burha Luit* here translates to 'The Old Brahmaputra' and is called so because it was the erstwhile course of the river, the memory of which has been kept alive by the people.

bodies of different kinds which the locals have classified as per their usage and characteristics. Das (2014: 180) and Gaikwad (2019: 74-75) have noted this classification as:³ *Pukhuri* – ponds used for washing and fishing; *Hola* – natural depressions in the fields, smaller than wetlands and shared by the local communities for washing cattle, fishing, and as places that yield cattle fodder; *Khai* – water bodies running parallel to roads as shallow ravines, created deliberately, and used as boundary markers for households, or vegetable yards; *Dubi* or *Duba* – formed by seasonal floods that are mostly used for fishing; *Pitoni* or *Doloni* – shallow marshy lands with savanna type of grass found mostly in the island interior that are fed by streams and small channels, forming ideal breeding grounds for migratory and local birds; *Beel* – large wetlands connected by small streams or depressions that owing to their size are used as collective village resources, connected further to larger streams that join the Brahmaputra; *Jan* – small streams that dry up seasonally; used for fishing and washing; *Suti* – perennial streams used for fishing and washing; and finally, *Nadi* or *Noi* – rivers that bring alluvial soil, provide driftwood and other aquatic resources. On account of the fertility of floodplains, one can find in Majuli a great variety in vegetation – herbs, trees, and crops. Nath's (2009: 26) fieldwork informs us, that people from the older generations of the island recall how during their youth the island was filled with thick forest patches that were home to many animals and birds. Today, one seldom comes across them; to meet the demands of a rapidly growing population many such forest patches have been cleared and converted into agricultural fields and settlement areas. Bank erosion has further complicated this problem – as the Brahmaputra continues to engulf the whole villages, and more and more people are forced to migrate to other places or clear forest areas for resettlement. Being located on an active floodplain of a braided river,⁴ the fluvial processes of flood and erosion have been commonplace in Majuli (Das 2014: 172, Bharasa and Gayen 2020: 10). In fact, to be precise, it was the flood that facilitated the final stage of geomorphologic evolution of this island,⁵ as discussed earlier. Apart from the nature of the river, the stratigraphy of the soil is also responsible for determining the vulnerability of an area to erosion. Studies reveal that the topsoil of Majuli is underlain by a stratum of sand. As sand has no cohesive properties, Majuli becomes susceptible to erosion (Singh and Goswami 2011: 5568, Dutta et al. 2020). It has been observed that the southern side of Majuli witnesses greater erosion compared to the northern,⁶ with the rate of erosion in the southwestern part

³ Both authors report the same classification except for the category, '*khai*', which Das omits.

⁴ A braided river is one which has multiple channels of different sizes with several confluences and diffluences. The landmasses between these channels are known as braided bars or islands based on their sizes. High glaciofluvial sediment discharge and deposition result in a river taking such a form (Carrivick and Russel 2007). They are prone to both flooding and bank erosion. The Brahmaputra carries as much as 597 tons of sediment every year, making it a highly braided river. The fluvial phenomena of flood and erosion are, therefore, very common to the Brahmaputra basin (Singh and Goswami 2011: 5566).

⁵ It is important to note here that by "the final stage of geomorphologic evolution" the author refers to Majuli taking the form of a river island which materialized with the shifting of the course of the Brahmaputra in the late 17th century. Being located on an active floodplain the overall geomorphologic evolution of this place is an ongoing process through continual activities of deposition and erosion.

⁶ The channel of the Subansiri is undergoing a northward migration. Its ability to cause erosion is, therefore, less compared to that of the Brahmaputra (Bharasa and Gayen 2020: 10).

being still greater (Bharasa and Gayen 2020: 10). Further, the rate of erosion drastically increases during monsoons due to a heavier discharge and stronger currents (Dutta et al. 2020). Therefore, the people of Majuli are very familiar with these annual fluvial processes and have established an equilibrium with their environment by adjusting their lifestyle to its realities.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the People of Majuli

Having coevolved with the floodplains of the Brahmaputra, the folk culture of Majuli is seen as attuned to the freshwater ecosystem of the region. This attachment with the environment finds expression in certain folk songs in which analogies are drawn between natural phenomena and the protagonist's emotions. One such Mishing folk song, *Adi:asi Bidyi:dung*, which was related to the author by a local resident, Mr. Amiya Kumar Chirang, opens as follows:

*Water from hills rolls down to the plains, whether the areas be low-lying or high;
And my mind is also yearning for love knowing no bounds of nearby and distant lands.*

The indigenous communities that reside on this island have not only learnt to cope with annual floods by taking certain preventive and emergency measures, but remarkably enough, also use the flood to their benefit as seen in such livelihood practices as agriculture, pottery, mask-making, and fishery. They have further learnt to identify and utilize the resources offered by their environment such as using indigenous herbs and plants for health preservation and the conservation of their material heritage. Flood preparedness among the people of Majuli can be viewed as steps that are taken before the arrival of the floods, and those taken during it. Various indigenous communities have developed their own ways of forecasting the weather and predicting an impending flood through a careful study of the natural world around them. This includes observing the behaviour and characteristics of animals, plants, clouds, and the river itself. This knowledge is orally passed down from one generation to the next in the form of folk beliefs, tales, songs, proverbial sayings etc. In a case study conducted on the Brahmaputra basin in eastern Assam (the region in which Majuli is located) by Das et al. (2009: 28), they compile a list of such folk beliefs about flood symptoms that are as follows: excessive flowering of the mango tree signals an impending flood; excessive flowering of the jackfruit tree implies a good paddy crop; rainfall on *Maghi Astami* (the eighth day of the month of *Magha* coinciding with 21 or 22 January in the English calendar) in a particular year augurs flood; cows behave erratically just before a flood; if cows are found to be standing in the cowshed in the morning of the day of *Goru Bihu* (the first day of the *Bohag* month coinciding with April 13/14) the next season will have flood which will be more severe than usual if the colour of the cows is blackish; frog calls indicate an impending shower; uninterrupted frog calls imply heavy showers and probable flooding; thunder in the northern sky in the rainy season is usually followed by rain; an absence or a scarceness of fish in the river in the early rainy season indicate that there will be flood; grey clouds in and low visibility of the distant hills imply rain in upstream

Brahmaputra and flood in the plains usually within three to twelve hours; the current and the ebb and flow of the river inform about the severity of floods.

It is also a common folk practice to keep memories of past floods alive through sung narratives. One such Ahom narrative collected by Das (2014: 181) during his fieldwork in 2005-2006 tells the story of a great flood brought about by the wrath of the gods. The sole survivors of this deluge were two men, Khunlitang and Chuliyang, and their wives who took refuge in the Sigrabhum hill and later on, became the progenitor of human life on earth. From a folkloristic point of view, it is interesting to note that this narrative has the classic motifs of flood myths found all over the world, as pointed out by Kluckhohn and Utley: the deluge is a form of divine retribution, and the flood's destruction leads to a kind of purified re-creation (Peschel 1971). At present, flood preparedness at the community level also involves monitoring embankments to prevent probable breaches. This involves identifying weak spots which are typically undercut by water and allow water to penetrate the soil. Bubbling of water near a spot in the embankment is a tell-tale sign of structural weakness. Cavities in such weak spots are plugged with sacks of sand (Das et al. 2009: 28). The vernacular architecture, especially of the Mishing community has much relevance in this discussion. The Mishings who usually live in the riparian area of the island build their houses on stilts made of bamboo and wood. Such houses are colloquially known as *chang ghars*. The height of the stilt ranges between six to eight feet conforming to the highest flood level recorded in the area. This is based on memories of past floods which are transmitted by the older generations to the younger. The floor of the house is adjustable, i.e., they can be raised or lowered depending on changing water levels. Further, they can be disassembled easily or abandoned and rebuilt without significant financial loss. The kitchen is set up in the centre of the living room. This is to maintain warmth inside the house in the generally cold riverine atmosphere, especially at night. Their food storage practices are also developed keeping in mind the demands and challenges posed by their environment. Cultural practices in the region are unique and can be seen as multi-tiered shelf system in which the lowest shelf, known as *parab*, is placed about four feet above the stove in the kitchen. This is used for drying fish and paddy, as the place receives direct heat from the stove, with the alcoves above called *rabbang*, used for storing pitchers full of *apong*, the traditional wine of the Mishing community. Vegetables are stored on the third shelf called the *kumbang*, with yet another shelf above called the *sansali* immediately below the ceiling. Here, the food items that are most vulnerable to water, such as seeds and rice grains, are stored. Other communities prefer to live in houses with raised plinths. Most families elevate the plinth further after a major flood to meet the rise in the riverbed, if any. The non-Mishing communities often build granaries on stilts, made large enough to accommodate the family in case a severe flood submerges their houses. These practices usually allow the islanders to cope with annual floods without much difficulty. But in the event of an extremely severe flood, the residents have to abandon their homes and take shelter in a nearby highland such as the embankment (Das et al. 2009: 29-33). Almost every household in Majuli owns a boat. Even those that do not own one invariably know how to fashion a raft, called *bhur*, out of plantain trunks. During the flood season, they travel

in these makeshift boats whenever required, to collect fodder for the cattle from low-lying *char* areas (Nath 2009: 78). Although most of the measures are preventive and preparatory in nature, for times when there is indeed a breach in the embankment or the river swells up enough to threaten to flood the village, with people responding by sending warning signals by whistling or beating the drum in the *namghar*.⁷ In the past, the Mishing community would use two traditional instruments called the *le-long* and *mabong*, which sound like cymbals. At present, with the availability of modern technology, such techniques have lost currency; people now prefer to use microphones or cellular phones to disseminate information about flood to the community (Das et al. 2009: 29). During floods, one notices a change in dietary habits among people. Foods that are nutritious and require minimal to no cooking are preferred. *Komal chawal* (soft rice) or *pithaguri* with *bhimkol* (dried rice powder with a kind of locally available banana) usually suffice for breakfast during the flood season (Nath 2009: 76).

For the indigenous farmer, regular annual floods are a welcome phenomenon because they replenish the soil with fertile alluvial deposit (Das 2014: 180-181, Sen et al. 2018: 27).⁸ With the help of his TEK, he grows specific types of paddy in specific landscapes. The *sali* variety which is planted in June – July and harvested in November – December, is grown at the centre of the island. This is because this variety is the most vulnerable to flood. The *ahu* variety, on the other hand, which is planted in February – March and harvested in May – June are grown in the islets. Finally, the varieties, *boro* and *bao* are grown in the low-lying areas as they are both considerably resistant to floods. While the former is planted in November – December and harvested in May – June, the latter is planted and harvested in February – March, and November – December, respectively. Owing to uncertainty brought about by erratic flooding patterns induced by the construction of embankments, farmers have taken to practicing mixed cultivation which ensures the survival of at least one crop in the case of an unexpectedly early or severe flood. Many have also taken to exclusively growing the *boro* or the *bao* type of paddy that has better chances of survival in flooded conditions. The *bao* is especially favoured in this regard as it grows taller when submerged in water and can withstand water currents to a considerable extent (Das et al. 2009: 34-35, Das 2014: 181, Inks 2018: 43). In 2015, to address the loss of cultivable land to sand casting and erosion, hydroponics, a kind of farming that can be carried out in the absence of soil, was first introduced in Majuli by the NGO, South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE). Borrowed from the farmers of the flood-prone area of Barisal in Bangladesh, the NGO worked with a handful of indigenous farmers from the region to improvise the technique to make it more suited to the local environment (SAFE 2017: 11). As such, floating trays prepared with locally available materials such as bamboo sticks, coconut wire, water hyacinth, vermicompost, hydro foam, and other jute geotextiles are now being used to grow vegetables such as

⁷ *Namghars* are community prayer halls which are found invariably in all settlements across Assam. They were conceptualized by the Vaishnavite tradition in the 16th century but today have become an indispensable part of the Assamese cultural fabric.

⁸ Floods are only perceived to be a threat when they are irregular and drastic, caused by an embankment breach. Under such circumstances, floods deposit sand instead of alluvium, which makes the soil infertile.

ladies fingers, tomato, chili, leafy vegetables etc. Apart from being climate-resilient, this kind of farming is also cost-effective and less labour-intensive. Although it is too early to determine the success of this endeavour, the results yielded so far have been encouraging (SAFE 2017: 16).

Fishing, which is primarily practiced by the Kaibarta community as an occupation, is governed by the community's understanding of landform, mating and migration habits of the fish, aquatic vegetation, and seasonal variations. It is primarily carried out in the wetlands in different seasons at different scales using traditional fishing instruments as *ghat jal* (a net used when the water level is low), *kerang jal* (a net used to catch big fish in the river), *kewali jal* (a net used to catch table fish from ponds and wetlands), *jako* (a triangular instrument made of bamboo or cane to catch small fish in shallow waters), and *khaloi* (a container made of cane or bamboo tied around the waist to store the fish caught with a *jako*) etc. (Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority n.d.). The practice of pottery is a timeless tradition in the villages of Majuli. It is practiced by the Kumar community and is predominantly a women's activity. The primary raw material is a kind of glutinous soil, locally known as *kumar mati*. Found in the riverbanks, about 20ft below the surface of the Earth, the procurement of this soil is a difficult process carried out by the youth of the community. The pots are handmade and furnace-baked. The furnace is prepared with bamboo, banana leaves and driftwood which come floating down the river during a flood (Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority n.d.). The craft of mask-making, initially conceptualized by Sankardev as a means of making the characters of Srimad Bhagawat Purana and the Ramayana more animated during their presentation in *Raas* and *Bhaona*, is an integral part of the cultural identity of the people here. The process of making these has remained the same and completely organic since their inception during medieval times: first, a frame is prepared with bamboo, then, it is coated with a layer of clay mixed with cow dung and given the desired shape. This is followed by the application of paper pulp over it which is covered with gum made from crushed *bhimana* or *kendu* seeds, the final step involves the application of colours made from *hengul*, *haital*, *neel*, *dhalmati* etc. (Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority n.d.). Herbalism is also widely practiced in Majuli (Nath et al. 2014, Barua et al. 2007) as one finds a number of medicinal plants in the vegetation supported by the island's unique landform and climate. The indigenous people have identified these species through generations of experimentation and observation. While some of this knowledge is exclusive to traditional healers and herbalists, the properties of others are commonly known to most though the different parts of the plant that are used and the mode of their application vary. To cite a few examples, while the root juice of *Bombax ceiba* (local name: *simolu*) is used to treat jaundice, the roasted leaves, and stems of the *Boerhavia diffusa* plant (local name: *ponownua*) are used to treat the same illness (Nath et al. 2014: 73). Another interesting area in which the application of TEK is observed is the methods used for conserving centuries-old artefacts in the possession of the *satras*. While metallic objects are cleaned using an herb locally called *tasinga tenga*, objects of gold, silver, ivory, wood etc., are conserved by keeping them in boxes made of camphor, *rudraksh* and *neem* woods. For the conservation of *samcipatta* manuscripts *hengul* (red lead) and

haital (yellow arsenic) are used along with tobacco and *neem* leaves (Burdhan 2016: 64, 77).

Some Concluding Remarks about Techno-Managerial Solutions

This equilibrium, already alluded to in the discussion above, is being challenged by the techno-managerial measures being adopted by the state to mitigate the problems of flood and bank erosion. State intervention in this regard increased conspicuously after the great earthquake of 1950; the bed of the Brahmaputra rose by several centimetres which disturbed the topography of the river (Bharasa and Gayen 2020: 9). This, coupled with the effects of global climate change (Gaikwad 2019: 26-27), resulted in severe floods in important towns on the southern bank, thereby alarming the government (Das 2014: 169). So far, state measures to address flood and erosion problems have been structural in nature, formulated primarily by civic engineers and hydraulic experts. Indifference to the epistemology of indigenous people is seen in the state's appointment of committees since the 1960s to study and suggest solutions to the Brahmaputra's problems: all comprising of experts from the West who based their research on "quantitative analyses of flood spates and georeferencing" (Das 2014: 172) and modelled it after river training projects implemented in floodplains elsewhere. For instance, when M.E. Weller of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was invited in 1970 to conduct studies and provide technical advice for the mitigation of flood on the Brahmaputra, one of the recommendations he made was to follow the standard adopted for the Mississippi River embankment project (Das 2014: 175).⁹ Thus, among the steps taken by the Brahmaputra Board, the nodal agency responsible for flood mitigation in the Brahmaputra basin, it is a focus on the construction of structures such as embankments, dykes, porcupines, levees, land spurs and bank revetments, that appears to be predominant (Das 2014: 172, Gaikwad 2019: 85). These techno-managerial measures that have taken little note of the complexities and the uniqueness of Majuli's ecosystem, have harmed the ecology of the island, and have marginalized the folk adaptive practices of the people. The construction of linear embankment structures, for example, has restricted the natural flow of the river. This makes them susceptible to breaches from hydraulic pressure, especially during monsoons. Therefore, while these structures have lessened the possibility of the occurrence of annual floods, when floods do occur owing to an embankment breach, they are far more disastrous than regular annual floods, resulting from problems such as auto-docking,¹⁰ sand casting, or siltation of agricultural lands (Das 2014: 180, Sen et al. 2018: 28-30). There are other problems such as the drying up of wetlands, as embankments reduce the free flow of water into the water bodies located inside the inlands. This is a major ecological problem as the wetlands serve as an important natural resource to local communities. For example, the Kaibarta, the principal fishing community of Majuli, along

⁹ As Das (2014: 180) notes, the Brahmaputra and the Mississippi are two different river systems with distinctly different fluvial processes. As such, the recommendation of the standard of the latter to address issues of the former has been largely questioned.

¹⁰ Auto-docking refers to the retention of water in the floodplain after a flashflood caused by a hindrance in the natural drainage system due to an embankment.

with the Mishing and the Deori communities use the wetlands as fishing grounds. Other communities use them for growing various aquatic tubers and shrubs since many of them having medicinal properties (Das 2014: 181). Apart from fishing, embankments have endangered other traditional livelihoods as well. For instance, the clay used for making traditional masks in Majuli is the alluvium deposited by the river during a flood. But as floods, in the present scenario, are mostly caused by embankment breaches the river casts only sand instead of alluvium. As a result, this traditional craft is currently suffering from an occupational setback (Chetry 2020: 19). An increase in the rate of bank erosion also coincides with the implementation of techno-managerial measures since the second-half of the 20th century. The total area of Majuli has shrunk from 1256 km² in 1950 to 423 km² in 2020 (Saikia et al. 2020: 14). This is because structures such as embankments and land spurs that control and divert the flow of the river have detrimental effects in the areas to which the waters are diverted, especially if these areas are unprotected by similar structures (Sen et al. 2018: 28, Gaikwad 2019: 82). The intensification of the problem of erosion has also prompted the Brahmaputra Board to impose restrictions in 2004, on digging on the riverbanks, for the collection of *kumar mati*. This brought difficulties for practitioners threatening their livelihood, as the quality of their pots suffered in the face of a scarcity of fine raw materials (Regon 2019: 953). Finally, the construction of these anti-flood and erosion structures are increasingly making the local communities dependent on external intervention and protection: as the frequency of annual floods decreases their traditional adaptation skills slowly become dormant and irrelevant making them more vulnerable to fluvial phenomena (Sen et al. 2018: 30).

Thus, the government, while addressing the issues of flood and erosion in Majuli, has given precedence to scientific knowledge over indigenous epistemology. As a result, there has been excessive dependence on quantitative and visual data, oversimplification of the man-nature relationship, and a generalization in the geomorphologic evolution of floodplains. These measures have strained the ecological equilibrium of the region. One, therefore, notices the development of new adaptive skills as communities attempt to address these new challenges. Whether in the context of adopting a mixed crop system or switching entirely to flood-resilient varieties of paddy, or learning to identify weak spots on the embankment, the TEK repertoire of the people of Majuli, has certainly undergone enhancement and modification in the face of new challenges. This offers us an opportunity to reflect on one of the fundamental characteristics of folklore – its dynamism. While colonial scholarship recognized folklore as a knowledge resource that perpetuated itself, seemingly unchangingly, across generations, Narayan (1993: 178) agrees with scholars like Blackburn and Ramanujan when positing folklore as adaptive and receptive to changes in the social, political, and economic spheres. In the context of Majuli, this is specially visible in the adaptation of age-old traditional practices that now try to meet contemporary challenges.

The relevance of TEK in the present world is immense. With rising global temperatures and sea levels on account of global climate change, it is now estimated that about 200 million people could be displaced due to climate-induced factors by 2050, a figure

predicted by British environmentalist, Norman Myers, and cited in such reputable publications as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change (IOM 2008: 11). TEK, under these circumstances, offers a wealth of knowledge that can help us navigate the current ecological problems. Its fundamental principles are based on respecting ecological equilibrium and exerting flexibility in the adoption of new strategies that adapt to an ever-changing, natural world. Therefore, to successfully address environmental issues of a particular region, it becomes imperative for scientists and policymakers to collaborate with indigenous communities and consider their epistemology. This has been recognized in the Cancun Agreement from the 2010 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP16 in Mexico, which constitutes one of the most important international documents on climate change adaptation (UNFCCC 2010) at present. The importance of such collaboration is also laid bare by two juxtaposed examples from our region of study: the complex ecological problems that have arisen out of the government's top-down approach in addressing flood and erosion in Majuli, and on the other hand, the relative success of hydroponic farming, introduced after incorporating inputs from indigenous farmers on modified techniques to suit the local environment. Thus, espousing scientific knowledge with indigenous knowledge is necessary to develop more sustainable solutions to ecological problems.

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Article 2.2

***Mahervashininchya Devi* or Deities Presiding over the Wellbeing of Women in Maharashtra**

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Abstract

This article describes the role of women-centric deities in Dapoli Tehsil of Ratnagiri district of the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. Analysing the presence of such seemingly feminist goddesses, like the *Mahervashininchya Devi*, literally translated as a deity presiding over the fate of married women in their *Maher*, or parental home. This article places women-centric deities in an anthropological and historical perspective, investigating their emergence as a response to patriarchal oppression. Describing local myths and legends associated with such deities, the article provides a general idea of their rituals and worship, further linking these with present times and the question of women's emancipation. This linkage provides us with the possibility of further elaborating on the functions of such deities that exert control over a sphere of influence that is both territorial, and simultaneously social in terms of gender relations.

Keywords- women, deities, justice, rituals, Maharashtra.

Introduction

Folk religion in the Konkan is a mixture of diverse and overlapping practices associated with the worship of various village deities presiding over rural life. While the initial part of this article describes female village deities and their territorial hierarchy in terms of rural space, the second part of the article describes their function that maintains women's social relationships within an often-violent patriarchal context. This is followed by a brief exposition on the rural deity *Mahervashininchya Devi* (henceforth MD) translated as the goddess who looks after married women in their parental homes, that is accompanied with a description of her legends and worship in the Konkan. The conclusion segment analyses her cult in terms of historical questions about gender emancipation in Maharashtra.



Figure 2.2.1 General Location of Ratnagiri District showing Dapoli Tehsil

It is quite common in rural Konkan to encounter shrines of numerous village deities that regulate daily life, resulting in their appearance within the local pantheon. The genesis of goddess worship is traced back to conceptualising her as supreme power or *Shakti*. Goddess worship in this context is traced here to the supreme feminine power or *Shakti* that is sought to be harnessed as a power of fertility within patriarchal society. The multi-tiered structure of the regional Hindu pantheon clearly prioritises female deities organized according to their own, independent sub-pantheon that is internally categorized according to a separate hierarchical structure among goddesses. The goddess is worshipped in three forms. The first form

represents ordinary and mild nature; the second form denotes the fierce form to which the animal and human sacrifices are made, and the third one symbolises the sensual nature in which she is the object of worship of Shakta school (Bhandarkar 1965:144). Goddesses like Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati are depicted as tame and beautiful, while goddesses such as Kali and Chamunda are portrayed as bloodthirsty and ferocious. On the one hand, wild goddesses are also viewed as representations of raw energy, and autonomy from marriage and family, while benevolent goddesses are considered tame, sober, auspicious and 'spousified' (Gatwood 1985). But herein also lies the paradox, that has human goddesses depicted as composite figures within mythology, like Kunti in the Mahabharata, who demonstrates both positive and negative aspects that overlaps the various deity types outlined by Bhandarkar (Sax 2002:134). The distinction and binary between goddesses that are non-human are associated with power, and is reflected in their placement within the hierarchy of pantheons, wherein the highest tier consists of domestic goddesses, while ancillary tiers are comprised of vicious deities commanding blood sacrifices. Their placement within the pantheon, speaks volumes about how a particular goddess is regarded in society. Within the existing patriarchal setup, women who are calm and composed are often praised as ideal, whereas those who exercise their free will are regarded as rebellious. Numerous women referred to as the modern-day Durga or Kali, because they break pre-existing codes of social and gendered conduct, are considered antithetical to 'spousified' goddesses. Goddess worship is extremely common in India, but there is clear discordance between the respect accorded to a female deity and the paradoxical, ill-treatment of women. While the Devi is more a mother than a warrior, her creative and aggressive powers are shared with human women. She cannot be entirely understood as a role model either, since goddesses are also above human

women full of aggressive energies (Hawley and Wulff 1998: 43). The presence of women-centric goddesses alludes to the hardships faced by the women in their daily lives in terms of their gendered roles as wives and mothers, but it is unclear what role goddess worship plays in their lives. For instance, does goddess worship provide emotional support to women burdened/trapped in oppressive conditions? Or does the mere existence of such goddesses keep authoritarian masculinity at bay? Do mythological stories, associated with such deities hint at their functional aspects within a self-reflexive patriarchy? Or does their presence encompass the process of women suffering oppression labelled as social misfits only to be integrated into the patriarchy through ritual and worship?

Village Deities in Dapoli

In the context of village life, one of the most significant and powerful divine presences is the *gramadevata*, a deity especially identified with the village, and for whom villagers often have special affection. It is not uncommon, in fact, for there to be several *gramadevatas* in one village, each having a specialised function (Kingsley 1988:197). In the case of Dapoli *tehsil*, the village of Anjarle for example is guarded by four *gramadevata* whose shrines are placed in four cardinal directions. The male deity named Bhairi, located in the southern direction, currently holds the superior-most position as *gramadevata*, while the female deity of the northern direction- *Savnekarin*, is venerated for begetting children. Two other deities *Dharuvatkarin* and *Pethkarin*, presiding over the east and west respectively are currently not worshipped, but certainly enjoy the status of guardian deities. Most guardian deities of Dapoli are female, and other male guardian gods are considered manifestations of Shiva's ferocious *Bhairava* form, known locally as Bhairi. The third category of *gramadevata* consists of dual deities or deities with consorts. The villages of Kudavale and Murud are for example, guarded by the duo Bhairi-Jogeshwari and Bhairi-Bhavani respectively. Bhavani is considered the benign manifestation of Shiva's wife, Parvati and the various *Bhavanis* found in villages are considered the spirits of girls killed unusually as a result of natural or supernatural attacks, or as victims of girl-child eradication and female infanticide. They are represented inside the house as small mounds, or altars made of clay. Originally considered malevolent, they are incorporated into the family as tutelary deities, who perform benign and protective functions, except for when angered (Hiltebeitel 1989: 154). Their ambivalent nature reconstitutes in the division of power between male and female protective deities in the village. The presence of two equally powerful deities functioning as *gramadevata* in Anjarle for example, draw analytical attention to the power play within the structure of the local pantheon, despite their hierarchical division between male and female forms. The notable feature about all these important village deities is the blood sacrifice they command as a part of their worship. Almost all *gramadevatas* are moreover, flanked by protector deities of their own, either within the sanctum-sanctorum itself though rare, or within the temple complex. Interestingly, when protector deities of the main deity are present, blood sacrifice is offered to protector deities instead, and not to the main village deity, creating the latter as either male, or a purified, benevolent consort-variety of presence that establishes a gendered hierarchy between her and her more malign

protectors. While this upsets the hierarchy between male and female village deities especially if the purified deity is a feminine one, while her protectors remain masculine, this demonstrates the separation of gender power relations from the sex of deities. While the purified goddess has to be a consort to be accepted despite being feminine, her more ambiguous, ambivalent aspects are separated from her and projected on to the often, lower-caste bodies of her male protector, who if not lower-caste themselves, are often worshipped as deities by local lower-caste communities. *Gramadevata* worship comprises either fear or faith for the deity (Joshi 1972), both emotions strongly re-constituting each other. The village deity often punishes her/his devotees for not adhering to social rules – mostly caste stratification and gender-behaviour rules (being able to give birth to male children being one of them), that makes the sacrifice commanded by the deity into an act of propitiation, appeasement and the acceptance of guilt and her disciplinary measures. The nature of the *gramadevata* dictates how she/he is being venerated. Almost all male *gramadevatas* are perceived ferocious, and worshipped out of fear, either to avoid punishment in the future, or to seek relief from punishment. Female *gramadevatas* are more varied, depending on whether they are single (ferocious) or consorts (benevolent) that in turn, impacts the purpose and method of their veneration. Stories and legends associated with female deities contribute to determining their traits, worship, and ultimately, their function in a particular village.

Kinsley suggests (1988: 200) that the mythological origin of the village goddess can be traced to the injustice done to women by men, and patriarchal society. The ambivalent nature of goddesses predicated on sudden outburst of rage; manifesting their bloodthirsty nature that claims animal sacrifice. Such goddesses are often seen with equally ferocious male protectors, who acquire secondary position within the hierarchy of the local religious pantheon. The pantheon encountered in Dapoli revealed numerous varieties of deities functioning as *Gramadevatas* and their protectors, in addition to family deities, deities worshipped for the eradication of diseases, begetting children or the well-being of women. (Patwardhan 2017). Not all these deities were found within existing village settlements either – something that includes agrarian areas outside the inhabitation space into the village space, in contrast to urban spaces. Some deity shrines are especially located near water bodies, for example, the *Sati aasra* shrine at village Gimhavane. The shrine of Varebua can be seen at the village boundary of village Murud. Both are worshipped for specific purposes. While the Sati aasra shrine protects the worshipper from water, the deity Varebua controls sea winds (*vara* meaning breeze or wind in Marathi). While these deities do not hold a prominent position in the village annual festival, they continue to exist as important village deities. The goddess Sitala otherwise known as the smallpox goddess is called Mari-aai or the Cholera deity in Dapoli, the word *Mari* here deriving from *Mahamari* or epidemic, is another popular village goddess. Regarded as a mother goddess who "...presides over small-pox and may prevent smallpox and also causes smallpox as she herself is smallpox" (Misra 1969), this deity plays a dual role in the village pantheon. She functions as *gramadevata* as well as the deity responsible for the eradication of disease. In fact, Mari-aai is well known for her special function of both causing and controlling epidemics. Again, deities presiding over child-birth also exist

among the *gramadevata* pantheon, and their function on being worshipped, is to specially look after the health and well-being of infants and their mothers. The ancient cult of Lajjagauri is an important example of such a fertility goddess who is considered a universal mother (Sankalia 1960, Dhere 1978). Similarly, the childbirth and fertility goddess *Savnekarin* in Dapoli can also be considered akin to ancient fertility deities like the Lajjagauri (Patwardhan 2017), and there is ample precedence to this in the Lajjagauri shrine represented by a nude torso at Siddhankolla in Northern Karnataka that witnesses worship from childless women every year. The goddess *Savnekarin* too, is worshipped by childless women seeking a ritual cure for their predicaments, while also functioning as one of the four *gramadevata* at Anjarle. The overlapping functions of protecting villagers, children, and childbirth itself is seen as the primary task of all the principal village deities of Dapoli, dominated by goddesses.

Patriarchy, Women and Goddesses

According to traditions of *stree-dharma* (Hindu religious law for women), it is every Hindu woman's personal duty to undertake wifedom and motherhood, and this confers her with social acceptance (Dandekar 2019). She is expected to be a chaste wife, a loving mother, and a responsible daughter-in-law. Only then can she be respected in society, and attain the title of an ideal woman. In an established patrilineal and patriarchal system, the ambiguity regarding the nature and status of women can be gauged on the basis of how they are being treated in society. Women are judged based on the behaviour and success of their husbands and sons. If the sons are ill-tempered, then their mother is to be blamed, and if the husband passes away, the wife is blamed. The notions of revering goddesses is a manifestation of patriarchal power that evaluates women as wives and mothers, while perceiving them as supreme supernatural power, exposes the dichotomy in the society. This tendency results in the subjugation of women at every step, especially as she embarks on new social relationships entailed in marriage, motherhood, and the shift of her status from a daughter to a daughter-in-law. Though women's role within the family is dynamic, their oppression within patriarchal structures can also not be ignored. Prem Chowdhry (2015) for example, demonstrates how male dominance is asserted through numerous intangible factors such as proverbs, customs, rituals, and family traditions. According to this, there are special abusive epithets especially reserved for a man who gives in to a woman's, or his wife's advice. He is considered a weakling and a coward, or a fool. But at the same time, the household is dominated by a woman, a matriarch – commonly the mother-in-law, who controls almost every aspect of her daughter-in-law's personal life. This inequality where the mother-in-law is highest, and where her son, the husband is not supposed to listen to his wife but only to his mother – another woman, often results in the isolation and ill-treatment of newly married women. As wives, brides have to be virginal, and submissive to their husbands, producing the latter as securely masculine. She is compelled thereafter to reproduce male heirs as early as possible. Such obligations often result in the naturalization of domestic abuse and marital violence that negatively affect the mental and physical health of women (Malhotra et al.: 1995), especially when the natural fertility of human women is measured in terms

of the auspicious and inauspicious. Marglin (1992) demonstrates this superimposition by describing goddess worship in Odisha as a ritual way of making a woman's womb fertile. She links this ritual with birth and death, and to the institution of *devdasi* implying female servants dedicated to particular deities, who are chosen by the deity and considered her extension. While the *devdasi* represents the auspicious nature of birth when associated with other women who are goddess's devotees, they are prohibited from having children themselves, since that would produce childbirth itself as inauspicious. This example demonstrates the tremendous control and ownership wielded by the patriarchal society over female body and reproduction that determines the position of women within the overall societal structure. Woman spending her newly married days as a bride at the receiving end of mother-in-law and husband, almost constitutes a form of social imprisonment till she gives birth to male offspring. She suffers from immense pressure in her initial days as bride. She is unable to openly discuss her personal problems, since in rural Marathi society such discussion is moreover perceived as betrayal to marital family. At such juncture, women approach village deities for emotional support. For example, while 'out-married' daughters of upper Garhwal are supposed to carry out special rituals in their natal village, before setting off on the divine journey of marital life, they are sought to be completely controlled by spouses, marital family, home, and village thereafter – the very rituals they perform in their native village, paving the way forward towards complete marital subjugation. The deification of goddess Nandadevi, a popular village goddess in Garhwal narrates a tale of a woman's marital hardships – her neglect in her husband's house, and her neglect by her father that finally compels her to suicide. Families that neglect their daughters moreover invoke the goddess's curse. However, the story has also been subsumed within patriarchal society, with the goddess being made into a focal point of power that does not include human women. As the pilgrimage carried out in the reverence of the deity does not allow newly married women to continue after a certain point on the route. Her legends provide women with no real solution, ultimately reaffirming the male dominance. These rituals and pilgrimages shape the evolution of possibly empathetic relations between women and local deities (Sax 1990).

Mahervashinichya Devi - MD

Married women in Maharashtra use the term *Maher* to denote their parents' household and identify themselves as '*mahervashini*'. The term '*Mahervashin*' is used for those women who are married in another village but are essentially connected to their birthplace or their parents' house/native. Though the term is customary, the phenomenon of distinctive deities 'of and for' married women is a new discovery. In Dapoli, married women worship the *Mahervashininchya Devi* (MD) as a goddess who presides over their well-being, and solving their personal problems with husbands and marital families.

Sacred centres like temples include other spaces such as ponds or nearby hills that have specific local folklore about also being sacred attached to them (Preston 1992). While

Serial No.	Village name	Deity for wellbeing of Women
1	Anjarle	Savnekarin
2	Asud	Kalkai
3	Chandranagar	Ghanekarin
4	Gimhavane	Jakhmata
5	Gudaghe	Navankarin
6	Murud	Janai and Marka
7	Kudavale	Valjai (dual function)
8	Phansu	Pathghanin

Figure 2.2.2 List of deities for the wellbeing of women in Dapoli Tehsil

some temples include folk deities like the *gramadevata* and MDs as well, placed sometimes at a short distance from the main sanctum, but within the boundaries of the temple or of the village. It is common to see villagers regularly placing carved hero stones discovered in their fields in village temples, so that deities inscribed and carved therein receive worship, and simultaneously increase the status of temples as centralized places of worship in the region. The MD of village Gimhavane in Dapoli is called Jakhmata or Yakshini (Deshpande 1995) for instance, and her shrine is located on the boundary of the village next to a pond. 'Jaka' in this case, is the corrupt form

of the word *Yaksha*, and Hadap and Joglekar (2008-09: 223-224) refer to village goddesses called *Jakhin*. Though the temple of Jakhmata is elaborate, and marks the end of village settlement, not all the MD shrines enjoy elaborate structures. At village Asud, an annual fair is organized for their MD called Kalkai located near the village boundary. The deity is enshrined on a simple plinth, covered with roof tiles. MDs are not identified by any iconographic scheme either, distinguished only as aniconic stones at the village boundary surrounded by ritual dedications. Their aniconic nature provides them with a 'folk' character in contradistinction to Sanskritic goddesses recognized by specific iconography. Most MDs can barely be identified as female, the reason being the way they are enshrined. MDs are often kept half-buried or prostrated on the ground. The reason for this is sometimes explained through local mythology that describes the goddess as potent and angry. As mentioned earlier, the annual fair of Kalkai at the village Asud witnesses the participation of only married men in the procession. Local legend has it that the goddess's idol at Asud is deliberately placed upside down, her front facing the ground. During her annual festival, villagers specially raise her to face the villagers, after which she is returned to her original position. Her gaze is considered too strong and potent due to which it is kept averted.



Figure 2.2.3 Kalkai kept facing down in village Asud.

No one village has the same tradition, making every village and their relationship with their own MDs unique. What is however common, is that MD worship is kept separate from the *gramadevata* worship though they are both interconnected within the village pantheon by an internal hierarchy between village goddesses. As MDs who are lower in pantheon, their shrines often gracing the village boundary, they are also more flexible, and open to new worship traditions. Any wish can be conveyed to her by a woman with the promise of an offering in return (such a promise is called *navas*). Officiating priests at MD shrines are generally the elderly village women, who act as mediators between the deity and her devotee. Though women also directly communicate with the deity, seeking her advice, and solutions to their problems that usually involve difficulty during pregnancy, and marital ill-treatment. The names of MDs define their position differently in every village pantheon. The suffix attached to the name of the deity shows the amount of respect each deity claims from the villagers. The suffix *aai* automatically confers her with the village's *gramadevata* function (Kosambi 1962). Other common MD name suffixes are *kareen* – or the doer of wish fulfilment, or simply *bai* or respected lady. MDs, therefore, have typical sounding names such as *Konzarkareen*, *Navinkareen*, or then, *Murubai*. Very few MDs have the suffix *aai* like Kalka-aai who functions as the *gramadevata* and eliminates the existence of an extra MD in that village.

Almost all MDs are said to self-manifest (*swayambhu*) in village at the time of crisis – during the untimely, violent death of married women. For this, the MD is considered a collective spirit of all married women in the village, returning to avenge their death. Such malevolent spirits are deified, and appeased by villagers to avert crisis and the goddess's

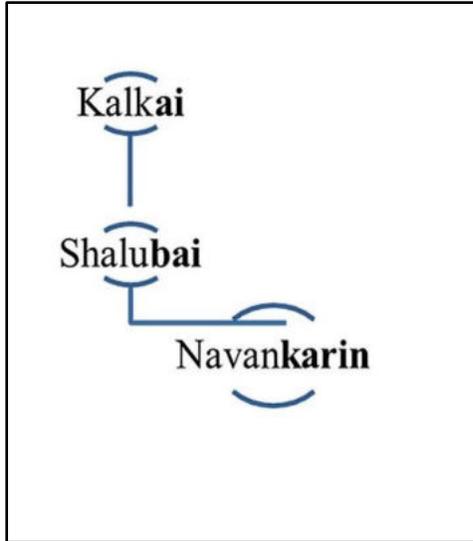


Figure 2.2.4 Hierarchy of deities for the wellbeing of women

curse. MDs are said to have transformed from malevolent to somewhat ambivalent nature only upon experiencing the power hold of *gramadevata* over them. The reason for such a shift can be traced back to the stories associated with the genesis of MD. According to village folklore, when newly married women or brides come to their marital village as daughters-in-law, they struggle to adjust with new surroundings, and heavy pressure. Some women are ill-treated, harassed for dowry, or for not conceiving, or sudden widowhood. The highlighted section of the story speaks about the death of married women. She is either forced to perform sati against her will since her husband died, or she committed suicide as she couldn't tolerate the ill-treatment given to her by her new family. A common strand of all stories indicates the violent and untimely death of married women.

¹The story continues with the return of spirits of daughter-in-laws determined to punish their families for their unjust treatment. The villagers in panic approach the *gramadevata* to pacify the spirit of the daughter-in-law and stop her from unleashing her anger on the village. The *gramadevata* transforms the spirit while granting her an extraordinary power of protecting the other married women. As a benevolent deity now, she receives worship as the MD. Numerous versions of the same story with minor alterations are popular throughout the tehsil of Dapoli.

The MD in this sense is similar to the Satvai childbirth goddess from rural Maharashtra that Dandekar (2017) describes, as a more ambivalent boundary goddess. However, in Dapoli, despite similarities with other places in Maharashtra outside the Konkan, the MDs of Konkan, as seen in Dapoli, are controllable, either through the tutelage of the *gramdevata*, or through the function of the *gramdevata* itself. This feature – of MDs being amenable to the discipline of the *gramdevata* or the *gramdevata* function, is further explored below, as a religious expression associated with Brahminism and the prevalence of education among Brahminical Konkani families. Women revered as heroines (*veerangana* in the form of Sati stones) for immolating themselves at widowhood are considered the ultimate performers of pious acts of dedication, and celebrated for confirming patriarchal injunctions about wives having no existence without husbands (Kingsley 1988: 40). The custom underlines how women always need to stay by the side

¹ According to Statista.com, in the period between 2005 and 2020 (report published September 2020), the average deaths associated with dowry was found to be above 7713, that hints at high prevalence: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/632553/reported-dowry-death-cases-india/> and furthermore, according to journalistic reports, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/economic-survey-of-maharashtra-state-records-rise-in-crimes-against-women-children-sexual-harassment-dowry-cases-see-drop-4382427.html> dowry deaths in Maharashtra dropped from 248 in 2016 to 234 in 2017.

of her husband, and their separate existence would not be accounted for in the society as per 'prescribed rules'. The question of whether a widow immolates herself willingly or is forced to do so remains unanswered. Normalising the human sacrifice of wives as an act that attains them *sat* and purity, Sati is celebrated as the peak of devotion for husband, and piety within the Hindu marriage (Dandekar 2018). And yet, interestingly,



Figure 2.2.5 Ghanekar in kept half buried in the village of Chandranagar

despite their purity, there remains the pain and sorrow of violence and injustice done to them, categorising women dedicating their lives to patriarchy as malevolent spirits. Such spirits turning into divine helping forces points to an essential aspect of worshipping the dead or ancestor worship. Stuart Blackburn describes (1985) violent deaths as catalysts of the deification process. In the case of MD, an obstinate malevolent spirit desiring to avenge her death is deified by villagers and propitiated for obtaining protection shows the degree of fear persisted in the mind of people. The spirit responds by rushing to help women in trouble, and curse or punish the troublemaker, keeping the devotee daughter-in-law's family on their toes. The constant guilt of family members having ill-treated their daughters-in-law keeps them alarmed about approaching punishment. They take the lead in fact, in worshipping MDs, asking for the goddess's forgiveness either for their deeds done, or in advance. But the deity remains, in this case (unlike Dandekar's Satvai in rural Pune who sides with the patriarchal family) on the daughter-in-law's side, forcing families to approach the *gramadevata*, requesting him/her to intercede on their behalf with the MD. However, they cannot overcome the anxiety of

being the main target of the deity's wrath. Hence, they approach the *gramadevata* and ask the chief deity to exercise some control over the free spirit of MD. The reason cited for MDs being half-buried in the ground in their aniconic form is said to restrain their physical mobility, so that they are unable to rush to women's need, and curse her marital family too hastily. Being half-buried, she provides silent protection from afar, which is already a strong reminder issued to marital families, to not cause their daughters-in-law any emotional or physical harm.

Though most MDs are female, there is a male MD called Marka in village Murud, who also protects married village women. He has a moderate character, unlike his name which means 'attacker' if disobeyed. The aniconic Marka rests on the plinth that encircles a tree

outside the *gramadevata* temple. However, he is not kept buried, or prostrated face downwards like female MDs, as his gender gives him more mobility and freedom – the assumption behind this perhaps being that male deities do not empathize as much with women as female deities, who as humans once in the past, faced similar problems. A male deity with a singular purpose of protecting women is a strange and sporadic occurrence in the general deity pantheon of Maharashtra.

Discussion and Summary



Figure 2.2.6 Marka as Mahervashinicha Dev kept on the plinth in village Murud

The notion of MD lies between the recognition that women are abused in society and the prevalence of patriarchal abuse itself along with the necessity to keep a check on mistreatment given to women. The myths associated with MD warn families against causing daughter-in-law any harm further holding them responsible for the genesis of a vicious spirit, who will avenge herself at the expense of the entire village. Strained relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are often the focal point of MD's mythology that yet again; focus on women's culpability – this time harming the entire village. It is older women now who are targets, having achieved domestic power at the very end of their lives. Many folktales have attempted to explore the particular thread of inter-relationship between women on the domestic forefront. In a joint family system, there is often seen a rivalry between the mother and the wife for a place in the man's heart. All the ensuing jealousy, cruelty and tyranny shared between them only allow future daughters-in-law, when they become mothers-in-law, to harass their daughters-in-law in the next generation- a way of passing down a legacy of domestic harassment within the Hindu family (Dharwadkar 2004:352).

One view argues that the goddesses function to as upholders of patriarchy by feeding women divine images of either decent goddesses who are submissively married or frighteningly out-of-control unmarried goddesses. At the same time, a frightening imagination of an uncontrolled and unmarried goddess, who has been wronged within patriarchy, also takes shape as the malevolent shadow of the submissive goddess. Feminine independence is associated with ferocity and cruelty. Women are encouraged to imitate Sita, while the ever-presence of the other shadow Kali within each woman is never allowed to surface. On the other hand, the ferocious Kali aspect of Hindu goddesses represents women's liberation as compelling, provocative, and inspiring. Their ferocity is not at all frightening but is a model for gender autonomy, though within limits (Hiltebeitel and Erndl 2000: 105). It is well evident in the MD's half-buried self within her own shrine. Diesel (2004: 17) links goddess worship in all its multifarious forms with women's social mobility, and the strengthening of their worth in society. Yet, the pilgrimage of Nandadevi illustrates a contrary scenario, where newly married women help to reproduce a system of social relations that keeps them in a subordinate position by participating in the rituals of Nandadevi. The rituals offer them a partial remedy for their frustration at being forcibly separated from their natal places (Sax 1991: 206). The goddess Nandadevi's story is similar to the MD. MDs provide women stress relief – but just enough stress relief so as to not push women into overthrowing the system. The physical restrictions put on the MDs recognizes the power of women, but at the same time gives men and marital families primary control over her through the power exerted by the *gramdevata*, who is an agent of village patriarchy. The annual procession of the MD is therefore, aimed, at pacifying her as precautionary measure to avoid severe crisis.

While Enthoven (1915: 21) divides deities in the Konkan into five classes: *gramdevata* or village deities, *sthanakdevata* or local deities, *kuladevata* or family deities, *ishtadevata* or chosen (personal) deities and *vastudevata* or *grihadevata* as deities that preside over the home, he does not include deities associated with special functions like the MD. Yet, the MD fits well into all five categories. As already mentioned, she overlaps with the *gramadevata* and her function. The MD also defines spatial relationships between village, community, family, and individual women by being intensely local in terms of status within the local pantheon, furthering exerting the power of her shrines in a complex web of geographical and social identities. Deifying ancestor women also makes the MD a family deity who presides over the home and a personal deity chosen by women, all rolled into one. The binary between Sanskrit goddesses and folk goddesses becomes artificial here as goddesses and their function are not fixed entities. Instead, they constitute as a part of an evolving process that once assimilated blood-sacrifice demanding regional goddesses like Kali and Durga into the Brahmanical pantheon., Their ferocity towards male adversaries (Diesel 2002: 43) was gradually assimilated into Brahminism with their demonic adversaries being identified as deities of lower-caste, Adivasi groups. MDs blend distinct elements from both Brahminical and folk religion, through their very mobility within the village pantheon that easily overlaps with other deities. MDs are defined by their adaptability. Being the secondary deities within the pantheon does not restrict MDs from constituting an integral part of the pantheon as they are flexible and adaptable.

They represent social relations of women within the home, the home here being analogical for the pantheon. They also portray the changing, inherited mode of harassment between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The eternal and dynamic Hindu system is a result of this innate process of rebellion and assimilation.

Overall literacy and educational facilities have become more accessible to women with time resulting in rising social awareness about women's equality. The scattered but uninterrupted worship of MDs has adapted itself to this agenda of women's empowerment. Though women still worship the MD, the complex hierarchy of village pantheons lessens in its impact with the modernization of the village. Ritual celebrations surrounding the goddess now take on a new role incorporating a variety of new practices. Village celebrates and commemorates its own traditions, identity and unique history that laud traditional ritual practitioners. However, the intimate links between women and MD's problem-solving function as a deity disintegrates gradually. These deities were 'created' and also 'assimilated' into the chief deity with the need of time and social conditions. The diminishing number of this particular set of deities can be the result of two contradictory ideas – either female education materialising in the elevated position of women in society where they no longer need the MD to solve their marital problems or rising apathy about women's suffering. This paper suggests that it is the combination of both: women facing the burden as financial contributors of their marital families and asking the goddesses for support to resolve their personal problems. Since the families still constitute as a key component in violent, patriarchal social context, it results in exerting additional pressure on women's emotional well-being. Venerating a deity to relieve the stress may earn them accusations of being irrational and superstitious despite their education and empowerment. At such juncture, the existence of MDs hints towards providing an emotional outlet for women's internal turmoil regardless the present social circumstances.

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Article 2.3

Critically Endangered in Nature but Abundant in Folklore: Legends of Tigers in Manipur

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Abstract

This paper makes a critical analysis of how tigers are represented as evil beings in the Meitei folklore in Manipur, that further narratively produces them as a favourite prey for hunting within a historical context – local kings, and then British officers, and poachers who demonstrated their valour by hunting tigers. In numerous ways, this study of tigers in Meitei folklore adds to our understanding of the root causes of tiger depopulation in Manipur, as reflected in the Meitei social attitudes. The Meiteis of Manipur have a rich tradition of folklore that include stories, ballads, and riddles, where tigers play the role of the main protagonist. Tigers are a critically endangered species in Manipur, despite their substantial visibility in Meitei folklores and other documentary and textual sources. Many wildlife reports increasingly refer to Manipur as tiger-absent-state. While the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in 2018 declared eighteen states of India as Tiger regions, Manipur was excluded from this list. This current article highlights the portrayal of tigers as an enemy of human beings in Meitei folklore, contributing possibly to the cultural endangerment of the species, while at the same time, justifying and reflecting the cultural apathy to tigers.

Keywords: Endangered, Manipur, Meitei, Nature, Tiger, Wildlife.

Introduction

The tiger is a regular feature, albeit a negative or ambivalent character, in the Meitei folklore, the folklore itself offering its audience with forgotten knowledge, traditions, and customs, and being illuminative as Bascom writes (1953: 283-290), “of a cultural history of man and nature”. On the other hand, the tiger population is steadily declining, with some subspecies already extinct.¹ According to the World Wildlife Fund, though the overall tiger population has bounced back due to several conservation efforts, after

¹ For details see, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Species Directory, ‘*Protecting Wildlife for a Healthy Planet: Species Tiger*’ (See URL in the reference list).

almost a century of decline in India, China, Bhutan, and Russia, the survival of tigers is still in crisis in Southeast Asia. At present, tiger numbers in Manipur forests have drastically declined, and perhaps tigers have even disappeared due to ecological change.² The forests of Manipur were once said to be a significant habitat for tigers, evident from oral narrative and folklore, and this paper explores whether the decline in tiger numbers, finds cultural reflection and attribution to folktales where tigers were associated with malice, and as monsters, to culturally justify their extensive hunting. It is interesting in this context that much of Meitei folklore uses the tiger as the main protagonist of folktales. There are in fact, several fascinating but often neglected collections of oral and written sources solely devoted to tigers, such as, *Tapta* and *Kabui Keioiba* that characterizes them as savage beasts. Besides folk material, several monographs which mentioned about tigers have also been written in the nineteenth and twentieth century by British officers.

Tigers in Colonial Manipur

The British annexed Manipur in April 1891 after the Anglo-Manipur war, although they were already stationed in Manipur some decades prior to the Anglo-Manipur War. The advent of colonial rule, however, changed little about human-tiger encounters. Tigers continued to prey on livestock and sometimes people, and humans killed tigers for self-protection and livestock in retribution of these attacks. Colonial monographs on the Meiteis like Hodson's "The Meitheis" (1908) and W McCulloch's "Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes, with a Comparative Vocabulary of the Munnipore and other Languages" (1859) describes tiger hunting and human-tiger conflict in Manipur, particularly among the Meiteis. While he identifies the principal wild animal found in Manipur in all the seasons to be the tiger, he also includes wild hogs, hog deer, and a large species of deer in his description (McCulloch 1859:29). While both the tiger and wild hog are destructive to human life, McCulloch declares that tigers were always considered destructive animals among the Meiteis, resulting in the formation of traditional cultural zones in Manipur, divided into various *keiroop* or tiger parties. Whenever there was an increase in tiger attacks in any particular district, the tiger's whereabouts (the exact location of his lair) was reported by a man called a *Hui-rai* (possessing a dog or *hui*) and other scouts. The *Keiroops* would mark the animal down and surround it. Then, they cut the forest in a circle, all around the tiger's lair, protecting themselves with a net fence during the operation. After that, they erect a stockade or barricade of reeds and bamboos around the spot and report the animal either to the capital, or to the king. A deputed official would then arrive in order to shoot it. Sometimes rockets were used, and other rough squibs were fired into the forest to provoke the tiger. The infuriated creature would, hence, often rush to its own death by charging the line of nets. McCulloch also writes that before firearms were in general use, it was customary to enter the barricade or stockade on foot, armed with a traditional spear (perhaps the *Lumbu ta* that was used by the Meiteis to kill tigers). This method was dangerous, but he described the Meiteis as

² For details see, ENVIS Centre on Wildlife and Protected Areas.(2021, May 07) 'Protected Areas within Tiger Reserves (area-wise)'. [See URL in the reference list]

full of courage and resourcefulness during emergencies. McCulloch further goes on to describe a personal incident of witnessing a tiger attack, wherein the tiger entering the home killed seven individuals, and ate one of them (McCulloch 1859: 29-30). In "The Meitheis" (1908: 46), Hodson describes the Meiteis as an orthodox Hindu group who were not hunters. Nevertheless, he believed that the Meiteis, were once great hunters, and that their numerous killings of tigers were only in self-defence, to preserve human lives and livestock from depredation. Hodson (1908: 46-47) also describes a personal experience that credits a young Meitei man as unexceptionally brave. When a group of British officers went to Imphal to shoot a leopard, the wounded animal sprang on one of them inflicting severe injuries. A Meitei man, a casual passer-by came to rescue, and staved off the leopard, only with a bamboo, till the leopard let go and ran away (Hodson 1908: 47). However, from such written British accounts, it is hard to trace whether the Meitei attitude to wild animals in general and tigers in particular underwent any changes at all. Instead, British presence in the region saw the development of advanced weapons like guns and rockets that were used to kill tigers. Also, population growth, and agricultural expansion narrowed the human-tiger gap quite substantially as deforestation, led to the loss of wildlife habitat, resulting in increased human-tiger conflicts in Manipur. Hunting, was a known, and favoured leisure activity for many British officers that might have contributed to the demise of tigers, along with other wild animals such as leopards, or bears. Violent human-tiger interactions only increased with time, as farmers and their livestock pushed into tiger territories. The gradual disappearance of tigers from Manipur hence, resulted from a combination of many factors such as habitat destruction, overhunting, and the already negative attitudes to the tiger among the Meitei and other indigenous groups.

Tigers in the Meitei Folklore of Manipur

The Meitei ethnic community, concentrated in the central plains of Manipur, speaking the Meiteilon language, and writing in a script called Meitei Mayek, is the largest group in Manipur, along with other groups like Meitei Pangal, Naga(s), and Kuki(s). In addition, there are many smaller sub-tribes within the region as well. The interaction between these ethnic groups is crucial for understanding interlinkages between ecology and folklore within the region, as thousands of folktales bear witness to the historical, cultural interactions between the tribes and groups presently living in the state. If appropriately documented, their folklores constitute a valuable resource for human-environment relationships, oriented to local culture, indigenous knowledge, and oral history. Meitei Folklore is replete with tiger legendary that can be interpreted as the primary demonstration of local apathy about the disappearance of tigers in the state. The core discussion in this paper examines how folklore, that especially concerns tiger legends, plays a significant and sensitive role in understanding the ecology of Manipur, from the Meitei perspective. Folklore among the Meiteis of Manipur is a historical resource for human-environment relationships, which as Yoon (1976: 233) puts it: "is a living tradition

reflecting people's ecological insights and perceptions".³ However, at the same time, there exists no term denoting folklore in *Meiteilon*. Folktales are known in loose translation as *Phunga Wari*.⁴ Nevertheless, Dr. Oinam Ibochaoba Singh, in his book *Folklore gi Vigyan: Ahanba Saruk (2001: 5)* claimed that folk can be translated into *Khunung* and lore as *Lousing* in Meiteilon. In his work, he discusses folk and lore separately and concludes that "folklore is the wisdom of the locals" (Singh 2001: 8).

Animal tales comprise an essential part of folklore and many folktales depict the peaceful co-existence between humans, animals, and forests. Though some folktales demonstrate the dire consequences of humans and animals failing to peacefully coexist, such stories are pejorative, identifying such failures to have an anti-civilization effect, compared to successful coexistence stories that paint a happy picture of regional harmony. In many significant ways, animal folktales uncover the various nuances of pre-urban history, when humans respected wild animals, and a time when ecological disaster was outside imagination. However, a rapidly expanding list of endangered species, ongoing climate change, and ecological imbalance is perhaps indicative of the fact that humans and animals no longer share the symbiotic relationship that was portrayed in earlier folktales. While conflict between humans and animals within folktales documents ecological crisis that demonstrate apathy about endangered species, conservationists can also explore how cooperative relationship between humans and animals have become compromised over time due to politically mediated social approaches that makes folklore an important ecological reserve of regional information.

In Meiteilon, the tiger is known by the indigenous word *kei*, while *pamba*, which is an archaic term for tiger, is by now obsolete. Early depictions of tigers in Meitei folklore display both its benevolent and malicious forms, while some folktales represent the tiger in paradoxical ways – as both a lumbering fool and a menacing threat. For instance, in the folktale *Tapta Laak a!* or *Tapta* has come,

A tiger enters a village to feast on domesticated horses. While the tiger is hiding inside the stable waiting to pounce, he gets distracted by the sound of a crying baby. Then the tiger overhears the child's mother, trying to quieten the child by threatening it, that a tiger would come and eat it up. She describes many other fierce animals, but to no avail. The child is undeterred and continues to cry. After trying the names of almost all animals, the mother is finally successful in quietening the child by saying: "There comes *Tapta!*" Hearing this, the child suddenly stops crying. The tiger, hearing what happened said to himself: "The child is not afraid of horses, elephants, tigers or lions but stops crying only when she hears that *Tapta* has come! Therefore, *Tapta* must surely be a fearsome animal."

³ William John Thorns (1803-1885), a British writer credited with coining the term Folk-Lore. Also see, Dorson (1978: 23, 1967: 46), Sugiyama (2006: 330), and Bunkse (1978: 556) for a greater discussion about the validity of folklore to understand history and ecology, and community art.

⁴ *Phunga* in Meiteilon is traditional cooking lamp that is placed in a particular space called *Chakhum*-Kitchen. While *Wari* in Meiteilon means 'tale'.

Meanwhile, a thief enters the stable at the same time, to steal a horse, and instead of a healthy and strong horse, happens to grab the tiger's legs. He then saddles and reins the tiger, scaring the tiger badly, who by now believes that the thief is the real *Tapta*. The thief jumps on to the tiger's back, whips it, and starts riding it, fast as the wind. The tiger, terrified of *Tapta*, runs as fast as it can. But when the sun rises, the thief discovers that he is riding a tiger, and not a horse. He tries to think of ways to save his life from the tiger, and chancing upon a hollow log lying on the wayside, jumps to the ground and crawls inside the log, as the tiger nears it. The tiger, already scared, is startled by this sudden set of events, and begins to run at twice the speed. By and by, he meets a fox and narrates his story. The tiger and fox then decided to go and meet *Tapta*. They tie to secure themselves to each other's waists with a rope, so that neither of them can run away once they encounter *Tapta*. They find the hollow log where the *thief* is hiding, and the thief peeps out to check if the tiger is nearby. The tiger panics and runs for his life, but in the process violently drags along the fox, who is smaller in size. The fox tied to the tiger's waist crashes into the trees, and ultimately dies, torn to bits.

This famous folktale indicates the human's, in this case the thief's anthropocentric gaze towards other animals, while declaring the ultimate intelligence to be possessed by humans alone. Though the tiger is a malign creature in the story, he is petty, foolish, and easily frightened, somewhat like a house cat. The thief is similarly petty in his intent to steal. Though the tiger foolishly believes *Tapta* to be a special variety of scary monster, the thief is equally scared of the tiger. But the human has the good sense to hide, while the tiger, aided by the fox, returns to look for the human, proving himself to be foolhardier. There is deep native wisdom about animal behaviour and animal life in this story that human beings have learned to harness and control with experience and wisdom. The tiger, in contrast, similar to the cat, who proverbially, is too curious for his own good.

Another folktale, *Kei gi makolda lamhuina macha pokhiba* (when a fox delivers its baby in the tiger's lair), describes the predicament of a fox-couple living in the forests of Manipur.

When the female fox becomes pregnant, she demands a hiding place for herself and her new puppies. The male fox promises to find a suitable den, but instead of searching for shelter, roams around the forest passing his time. While roaming around, he comes across the carcass of the king's elephant. But since its hide is too thick and rough, he searches for and finds a hollow cavity created by vultures in the elephant's body. The fox entered inside the elephant's carcass through that cavity, but meanwhile the king's guards arrive to fetch the carcass. The fox, being clever and cunning, fools the guards by talking in the elephant's voice from inside the carcass, pretending that the elephant is still alive. Masquerading as the elephant, the fox says that the many years of service it has provided to the king and noblemen has drained and exhausted it; it requires rest. He warns the guards not to come too

near, since it may fall on them and crush them. So, the guards bow and remain at a distance. Finding his chance, the wily fox makes an escape. The royal guards, however, see this, and chase the escaping fox by following its footprints. While running for life, the fox came across a tiger, and tricks the tiger, saying that the royal guards are chasing him because he rejected the proposal of the king's daughter. The fox then suggests that the tiger, being wise and ferocious, would be the more deserving and ideal candidate as the king's son-in-law. The tiger is delighted and approaches the royal guards.

The cunning male fox in the meantime explains the whole story to his wife, but the problem of the safe den remains unresolved. The following day, the fox-couple discovers an empty tiger's lair, and the female fox gives birth to their puppies there. But when the tiger returns, he suddenly hears sounds of babies coming from inside his lair. He asks himself, "which ferocious animal dared to deliver their babies there?!" The frightened tiger then approaches a monkey and asks it to check inside the cave. The female fox protecting her new-borns, sees the monkey and the tiger approaching and taking advantage of the situation, shouts in a scary voice: "Hey! Monkey! I offered you three ferocious tigers when you had a baby, but you offer me only one tiger?! I reject your offertory!" This cooked-up story makes the tiger suspicious of the monkey. Losing his temper, the tiger attacks the monkey, who manages to escape by climbing a nearby tree. The furious tiger, afraid of whatever is inside the cave, abandons his lair. The male fox, who is hiding and watching till now, praises the female fox for her wisdom, wit, and courage.

The tiger in this Meitei folktale, like in numerous others, the anthropocentric description of the tiger remains ambivalent: it is a timid, and unwise creature, who is often easily outwitted. And it is his very ambivalence that makes it simple to manipulate towards violence and evil deeds. Given the tiger's ferocity and strength, his foolishness is a dangerous characteristic that has the potential to transforming him into a dangerous enemy.

There are many such Meitei folktales, where tigers act as prominent protagonists. Meitei cosmogony or stories about the creation of the universe, is described in the ancient manuscript *Panthoibi Khongkul* (the footprints or footsteps of Panthoibi)⁵ that narrates the creation of the earth and the heaven by God.⁶ The legend of Panthoibi is one of the most important, and in fact, the foundational myth of Meitei civilisation, handed down as legacy over successive generations, written only later in the Meitei script. The most interesting feature of this myth describes the shape-shifting and human figure of the

⁵ An ancient Meitei literary work, collectively known as *Puya*. This work is a tale of the quest of the Goddess Panthoibi and her lover Nongpok Ningthou. Many scholars believe that this work was composed in the twelfth or thirteenth century, while some writings within the narrative are even earlier, from the late eleventh century. The scripture in the form of a modern book was published in 1972 by Moirangthem Chandra Singh.

⁶ For details see, Thounaojam (2011) Also for details on Meitei written chronicles, see, Devi, (2021), and Misra (2018).

tiger. In one of the sub-plots of the story, the Nongpok Ningthou (Panthoibi's love interest) appears to her in the shape of a tiger to tease her while she is taking a bath on the riverbank, in the land of Khaba. Panthoibi in retaliation, hits the tiger on the head with her stone scrubber. Furthermore, Panthoibi in narrative continuity, considered as one of the *Umang Lai(s)*⁷ of the Meiteis. In modern-day illustrations, Panthoibi appears in the form of a female deity riding a tiger in the pantheon, specially revered by the Sanamahi worshippers of Manipur. In Meitei oral tradition, Panthoibi is sometimes known as *Keijao Fabi* – one who can capture a tiger, or *Keirel Tongbi* – or one who rides a tiger.

In the popular Meitei folk-epic, *Khamba-Thoibi*, orally transmitted in the form of ballads and later compiled as an epic dimension running over forty thousand lines of fourteen syllables in 1940, *Khamba-Thoubi Sheireng* by the eminent Manipuri writer Hijam Anganghal (1892-1943), the full form of the Meitei epic finally came to light⁸. According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (as quoted by Sing 1975: 1582), Thoibi's story can be historically dated to the reign of the Meitei king Loiyumba who ruled the region of Manipur, around the Loktak lake from 1127 to 1154 A.D. Thoibi, the central female character of the myth of *Khamba-Thoibi*, is the princess of Moirang. She meets Khamba, a male mainstay, who is an orphan and who in his childhood, has lost his father Purenba, a nobleman. He is looked after by his elder sister Khamnu. Thoibi and Khamba are a pre-ordained pair with the destiny to fall in love, and so they fall in love with each other. Thoibi's yearning for Khamba is foiled by the jealous Nongban Kongyamba, the king's champion and most potent fighter, who has an irresistible desire to marry Thoibi. Though the king, is pleased with Khamba's heroism, strength, and beauty, the villain Nongban stands in his way. Due to the latter's ploy, poor Khamba is beaten-up, tied to the leg of an elephant, and dragged through the road in the dead of night. Thoibi is informed of this by the goddess Panthoibi who appears to her in her dream. She rushes to the rescue of her lover and Khamba escapes the many cruel plots of Nongban and the king's wrath, who champions the villain. Thoibi is exiled, but goes straight to Khamba's home on her return. Nongban then wants to finally settle the strife, and with the king's agreement, arrange for a competitive feat of rescuing a little girl, a widow's child, who is kidnapped by a tiger. The king, wanting to test the virtue and courage of two young men, declares that the one who kills the tiger will marry the princess Thoibi. Nongban succumbs to the fatal wounds caused by the tiger, while Khamba is able to kill it (Sing 1975). In another version of the same folk epic, Khamba's father, Purenba captures nine tigers. Once, when nine tigers turn up in his area, the king is worried for the safety of his public, since they are all man-eaters and the enemies of humans. The brave Purenba then, comes to the king's rescue and captures all the nine tigers, some dead and some alive, with the help of Umang Lai, the god of the forest. Here, since tigers are enemies, killing them is considered the bravest of acts, and a sign of incredible valour. Briefly analyzing the folk epics of Panthoibi and the *Khamba-Thoibi* story, the anthropomorphic gaze towards tigers depicts them in an ambivalent light – mighty, ferocious, creatures of great strength, but

⁷ Umang Lai are the group of sacred groves preserved for the local forest deities, worshipped by the Meitei people.

⁸ For details see, Sanasam (2019).

beings who are also easily fooled, defeated by brave and intelligent men, and hence, slightly contemptible. While Panthoibi can obviously control the tiger's advances, and through the symbolic figure of the tiger, the advances of her paramour who tries to disturb her while bathing, this makes her akin to a goddess. In the story *Khamba-Thoibi*, the tiger is a powerful symbol. The tiger represents Nongban a foolish but powerful enemy who dies at Khamba's hand, while the young girl, symbolizing the innocent love of Thoibi is rescued. Purenba is protecting the king's fiefdom and populace, again by vanquishing and capturing nine man-eaters with the forest deity's help. This version demonstrates not just the superiority of humans over animals, but the superiority of intelligence and wisdom over might and ferocity that can be vanquished, like the fox-couple were able to do, if the mighty being they are trying to defeat is without native intelligence. The tiger cuts a rather basal and foolish figure.

The human, shape-shifting characteristic of the tiger re-appears in other folktales, especially the mythical creature *Kabui Kei-oiba*.⁹ *Kabui Kei-oiba* has head of the tiger and the body of a human, and he is often described as *Sha tangkhaj*, *Mee Tangkhaj* (half man - half animal) in Meitei folklore. While legend says that he was once a skilful shaman or priest, he transfigured himself into a ferocious tiger, through his own witchcraft skills. As a result, and as punishment for his pride, he was ultimately forbidden from returning home in his original human form. In the tale of *Kabui Kei-oiba*, he was no longer allowed to live among other humans after his transfiguration. This turned him into a fierce and dangerous enemy, and a scourge for the *Meiteis*, and here, in his anthropomorphic form, the tiger poses a spectre of malice and hatred for humans. Because of the uncontrolled anger, strength and ferocity of tigers, that is accompanied by a fundamental weakness in their character, they are, especially in their man-eating form, considered arch enemies of human beings. One night when *Kabui Kei-oiba* enters a village to feast on human flesh, he finds and falls in love with a beautiful young woman called *Thabaton*. He captures her, for her beauty and wants to marry her. Nevertheless, she fools him, and escapes from captivity and later, her seven elder brothers together kill *Kabui Keioiba*, symbolising the triumph of the good over the evil. The shaman or priest's personality flaw, of being too proud and arrogant, is equated in this story to the anthropomorphic form of the tiger. The shaman is doomed to inhabit the tiger form forever, shunned from human society. Even when he falls in love with the beautiful *Thabaton*, there is no mercy, redemption, or forgiveness for him, in contrast to European folktales, where the beauty does indeed fall in love with the beast – her love itself possessing enough power to redeem, forgive, and humanize the beast. The tiger in this case, is again, easily duped, for despite his malice, he is foolish. His foolishness is a comment on the nature of arrogance itself, that according to the Meitei worldview, is associated with a-social attributes, enough to get a person excommunicated. Disallowed from ever becoming human again, and killed for even attempting it, *Kabui Kei-oiba*'s death at the hands of *Thabaton* seven brothers, demonstrates the real danger that ferocious animals like tigers pose for humans in the

⁹ There exist is a debate on the title of this folktale, as some scholars pronounce it as *keibu keioiba*, while others argue that the title is *kabui kei-keioiba*. For the purpose of this paper, I have used the title *Kabui kei-oiba*.

forests of Manipur. There is no question of forgiveness, when human survival is at stake. The deliberate presentation of tigers as foolish creatures is thus, a narrative symbol of what the Meitei personality itself, aspires to be – the very opposite of foolish tiger – intelligent, alert, strategic, and resourceful in terms of their survival in what is a tight man-animal relationship in Manipur.

Proverbs and sayings in Meitei folklore are one of the many arenas of analysis that tell us about the reception of tigers in Manipur. There are many Meitei proverbs that describe tigers like: *Kei kiduna chenlaga sakom oknei* or literally, “ran for one’s life from a tiger, but faced a bear instead” that can be translated as being between Scylla and Charybdis.¹⁰ Then, there is *Kei mamei oidou saruk houdong makok oijageh* that is literally translated to “be the cat’s head instead of being the tiger’s tail”, and means, that it is better to be the chief of a small group, rather than a subordinate in a large group. Finally, there is *Keinabu mayek mangbra* literally means that “the stripes of a tiger never disappear”, or that a thing of beauty never entirely fades.

The character and protagonist roles of tigers in Meitei folklore, reinforces the historical and cultural prominence of tigers living in close proximity with humans in Manipur. Though tigers are often presented as malicious, unwise, and as man-eating monsters, they are also foolish, and vulnerable. This ambivalence is rooted in the Meitei historical experience that represents the ecological stress included in living within the community, living with tigers, and also being capable of resisting tiger attacks through a mix of physical valour and strategic intelligence. While popular folk-art portraying tigers, such as illustrations of the fight between Khamba and Nongban, and the tiger, the metaphorical tiger retains, in its complex cultural manifestation, the tiger in its physically correct form. This demonstrates the threat and danger the tiger poses to humans in Manipur, while also symbolizing a personality trait that combines ferocity, hatred, and strength with foolishness – an anathema to the aspirational Meitei existential state of being intelligent, brave, and valorous, while living closely with tigers in Manipur. At the same time, as evident from the last proverb, the tiger’s ambivalence for the Meiteis also includes its beauty that accompanied by the more negative aspects that deserve no forgiveness and redemption, belies a sympathy and understanding for wild animals in Manipur that includes an appreciation of their beauty. At the same time, a history of existential threat pressuring human community life in Manipur also belies a subtle collective experience of what actual attacks or a combat with tigers entails in terms of unforgiving violence; while there is an enforced co-existence, there is no common ground between the Meiteis and tigers, in the tight human-animal ecological relationships in the region. For example, when livestock are harmed for Meitei villages, they commonly use the phrase, *Keina Chenlamani* to describe it, which means that a tiger must have taken away the livestock. Meiteis believe tigers to be premeditated beings, usually earmarking the animals they will eat in their lives. But when it comes to humans, they are doubtful since they know that fighting with a human will ultimately result in either their deaths, or

¹⁰ For details see, Singh (2018) Also see, Shakespear (1911) p. 473-475.

in the deaths of both tigers and humans. While such beliefs reflect a fear of the tiger's destructive capabilities, these also reflect the tiger's fear of humans. While Meitei officials in antiquity sanctioned a wide variety of combat methods against tigers that attacked human settlements, and this finds evidence in a special kind of spear known as *lambu ta*, that was specially used for hunting tigers. This spear was special for being very long, and could be wielded from afar, finding narrative representation in important folk epics like *Khamba Thoibi*.

The Way Forward

Modernity has not been kind to the wildlife, and it is impossible for endangered animals to survive in the Anthropocene, without being at the receiving end of conservation policies. The re-investigation of the history of various human-wildlife relationship across diverse ecologies is vital for understanding why the natural environment and local ecology has witnessed transformation, erosion, and destruction over time. While Meitei worldview and attitudes to tigers has been defined by ambivalent fear and contempt for the predator, this anthropocentrism is helpful to understand specifically human-tiger relationships in Manipur. While the Meitei existential worldview saw the Meitei man as part-tiger, evidenced in folktales about the crossovers between them, the tiger simultaneously symbolized negative personality traits that the Meiteis abhorred. This narratively produced tigers as metaphoric spectres of human avarice, pride, and a-social violence, while also producing them as metaphors of human foolishness and vulnerability. The Meiteis, however-much their ambivalence to tigers that was narrated in terms of the tiger's malice towards humans – evidenced in their attacking nature, tigers could also not be entirely ignored – they were appreciated for their beauty as well. However, the presence of tigers caused terrific anxiety, resulting in human efforts at controlling tigers. The recent focus on environmentalism in Manipur has activists express serious concern about tigers that has even led to a tiger survey in the state. Although this awareness coincides with the almost-disappearance of tigers in Manipur, tigers are now, also a part of nostalgia and an imagined past of Manipur. While this article does not intentionally blame Meitei cultural attitudes, it also takes full cognizance of the extermination and hunting of tigers. However, the traditional interpretation of tigers as malevolent creatures, contradicts the conservation perspective, with the latter laying no premium on human concerns. Human self-defence to tigers, and the concomitant Meitei worldview will hardly change unless human problems of poverty and livelihood are alleviated. Till then, tigers will only be figured as prominent, ambivalent characters of folktales. Efforts to preserve tigers will not be successful, unless human communities are also protected by the government, with conservationists and villagers living in close proximity with tiger reserves, working towards the emergence of long-term ecological security that will promote not just wildlife and tigers, but entire symbiotic ecosystems within the region.

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Abbreviations:

NTCA : The National Tiger Conservation Authority

WWF : World Wide Fund for Nature



Article 2.4

Fisheries and Ecology Portrayed in Konkani Proverbs¹

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Abstract

Ecology plays a vital role in producing a diversity of lifestyles, customs, and culture in India, with coastal Maharashtra or the Konkani belt demonstrating this aptly through its characteristically heavy monsoon that is interdependent on, and co-creates water bodies. The creation of sustainable water bodies in turn, bolsters the coastal fisheries of the region. Fish is a favourite and central part of the local meat economy that depends on almost daily consumption, with fisheries therefore constituting the chief element of coastal economy. This article based on ethnographic research describes and analyses the viewpoints of local inhabitants to fish and fisheries through proverbs and phrases encountered in the vernacular.

Keywords – Maharashtra; Konkani, food, proverbs, language, fisheries

Introduction

Maharashtra is one of the eight major littoral states of India, and the Konkani strip, which is a 720 km long, narrow land belt, located on the western coast, defined by rugged territory, heavy rainfall, and tropical, rice-fish eating culture. The region is rich in fishery resources, benefitting from the shallow waters of the Arabian Sea continental-shelf (Dikshit 1986: 211). Touching the Daman Ganga River in the north and the Terekhol Creek in the south, the ranges of the Western Ghats separate the Konkani coast from the rest of the state (Ketkar 1924: 398²; Karve 1968: 3; Dikshit 1986: 7). The strip is divided into North Konkani, Middle or Central Konkani, and South Konkani (Dikshit 1986: 153-163), and there is another internal, traditional division in the North Konkani that divides the hills from the plains: “the *junglepatti*, the forest-clad, hilly tribal interior; and the *bandarpatti* or the coastal lowlands with a prosperous rice-coconut-cum-fish culture” (Chaudhari

¹ Present article refers the word Konkani in the geographical context and not in the linguistic context.

² For more information: <https://ketkardnyankosh.com/index.php/2012-09-06-10-41-48/6241-2013-01-29-12-53-09>

1982)³. A similar difference operates between Central and South Konkan, with *khalati* coming to mean the coastal plains, and *valati* meaning the foothills of the Western Ghats (Campbell 1880: 151; Jogalekar 1952: 455-56). The shoreline is further intersected by large river valleys, small river inlets, and creeks. The rich shoreline creates a wide network of connected bays, lagoons, and marshes. All these water bodies provide ample scope for fishing throughout the year. "Characterized by heavy precipitation, paddy fields subsistence farming dominated by rice, the settlements on the coastline and promontories, are usually fishing hamlets with small fishing crafts anchored along the water edge" (Dikshit 1986: 153-163). Marine fishing is carried on throughout the year, except for monsoon months that are prone to storms (June to August). As colonial historians note: "As all classes, except Brahmans and Vanis, are fish eaters, fish is much sought after, and all the year-round, especially during the rains and hot months, the rivers and ponds are constantly swept by Kunbis and Thakurs, and, near the coast, by gangs of Son Kolis" (Campbell 1882: 54). Fishing is the main economic activity in the Konkan, involving labour from across caste, community, and religious denominations. Konkani Fishermen, having worked for generations in their profession, have developed a range of proverbs and phrases about fish and fisheries that reflect the involvement of non-fishermen in the fisheries, primarily due to their fish-predominant food habits.

This article reviews Konkani proverbs and phrases, used by various ethnic groups that include fishermen. These proverbs articulate the everyday life of the Konkani people, especially in relation to their intersecting food habits. While proverbs and phrases enrich language through their concise, rhythmic, and comprehensive expressions, they provide sharp critical commentary on society. They also provide speakers and their audiences with a description and experience of the regional worldview. Remembered for generations and inherited within a specific and inherited regional culture that transcends caste and religion, proverbs provide indigenous, and vernacular information on both natural and cultural ecology, while reflecting on cultural concepts interlinked with the local economy and consumption pattern. These Konkani proverbs are in Marathi and its regional dialects that overlap with common Marathi proverbs as well. There have been significant scholarly efforts made so far to compile Marathi proverbs dating back to the nineteenth century, reflected in the works of Sadashiv Vishvanath (1856), Manwaring (1899), Deshpande-Tarlekar (1900), and Bhide (1910). The Molesworth Marathi-English dictionary (1857) and Maharashtra Shabdakosh (1932-50) also explain fish-related idioms prevalent in all parts and classes of Maharashtra from a historical perspective. The later works of Lohkare (2006), Adhav (2009), Bhairgunde (2009), Bangar (2010), Kavathekar (2012), Gavali (2013), and Chaudhari (2018) provide regional proverbs and phrases from the Kokana, Koli, Agri, Malawani, Vadavali dialects of Marathi. Prabhudesai (2016) has compiled Konkani (Malawani) and Goan proverbs in the context of regional geography and folk culture. The present article analyses only the most typical of regional idioms about food and fisheries, with new ethnographic data, collected during fieldwork, hopefully enriching

³ For more information: <https://cultural.maharashtra.gov.in/english/gazetteer/Thane/geography.html>

earlier scholarship. Proverbs in this article have been systematically documented, embellished with ethnographic facets collected at the microlevel, and classified to present information on water bodies and communities, traps and methods of fishing, fish itself, and finally, fish consumption. The article concludes by commenting on how various micro-ecological geographical pockets affect cultural ecology in the context of fisheries and food habits, and how in turn, this impacts specific regional and communal traits, to form indigenous knowledge about how fishermen refer to traps, fish species, fishing time, and season.

Water Bodies and Communities

The geographical distribution of water bodies is significant in terms of its association with aboriginal fishing communities and tribes, who are bifurcated in terms of their zones of activity: those who work in the riverine zones, bay-fishers, and open-sea (coastal) fishers are mutually differentiated. This differentiation is moreover an accepted and established system that everyone adheres to. Those belonging to traditional fishermen communities and clans like the Koli, Bhoi, Machi, Kharavi, Daldi, and Gabit handle routine marine fishing, as they mainly depend on fishing for their livelihood (Bal and Deshmukh 1993: 88). They handle all maritime activities like large-scale fishing operations, handling of huge nets, and pulling boats onshore before monsoons. This pre-planned way of professional life, led according to the necessities of working in the deep sea, produces fishermen as courageous, thoughtful, and cooperative community. Communities such as the Agris and Bhandaris are also sailors, and fishers, who cultivate salty lands (Enthoven 1920: 14; 103). Bhils, Kokanas, Thakurs, Mahadev Koli, and Warali tribes and communities are more adept at inland and monsoon fishing that bolster their community's identity as professionals who fish in the upper (hillside) areas, in rivers and ponds. This type of fishing lasts until the respective water bodies dry in late winter. Monsoon fishing is in any case a seasonal activity carried out in streams within rice fields. The last group of fishers, the Kunabi farmers fish very few times a year, and simply do so for fun and personal consumption. They collect land crabs in the beginning of the monsoon season and sometimes fish in the rice fields with specialized tools (Campbell 1880: 99-103; Campbell 1882: 54; Edwards 1909: 135-141; Chaudhari 1989: 37-39).

The present survey found numerous proverbs that focused on relationships between water bodies and fishermen. While solo references to fishing communities emphasize their hereditary occupation as fishermen, the Gabit, a fishing community from South Konkan are referred to in a famous proverb that states, "Giving a cow to a Gabit and a boat to a Gurakhi" (Molesworth 1857: 233; Manwaring, 1899: 225) – with Gurakhi here meaning a cowherd. Just like a fisherman has no use of a cow, a cowherd too, has no use for a boat. A similar proverb refers to Daldi Muslim fishermen as, "A boat for Bhat (Brahman) and a holy water-pitcher for a Daldi" (Molesworth 1857: 411). A Brahman has no use for a boat and what would a Daldi do with a holy water-pitcher? The terms Gabit and Daldi here are caste-names, used as synonyms for fishermen. In the Alibaug region (North Konkan), a prevalent idiom describes the nature of the Koli community as too

imprudent, and ready to face the sea without hesitation or delay. It says, “A Koli, less-brained, jumps into the sea whenever he comes across one” (U. Kathe personal communication, October 15, 2020). This funny and pompous proverb reflects an elitist mindset that already considers fishing to be a lower type of job (though they like to eat fish). While the elites disdain fishermen; the proverb demonstrates the sense of ecological harmony, and courageous professionalism of fishermen. Proverbs about such imbibed communal traits, made by other communities is evident in one of the Malavani proverb from South Konkan that says, in an ironic tone, “Fish festoons for a Koli wedding” (Gavali 2013: 366). On any ceremonial occasion such as a wedding, or during festival celebrations, people decorate their homes with auspicious articles like flowers, banana, or mango leaves; a garland of flowers or mango leaves is festooned on the main door. However, according to the proverb, when a Koli gets married, this garland of mango leaves is replaced by a garland of fish. While meant to be humorous, it is a sarcastic, and hyperbolic comment overemphasizing the place of fish in a Koli’s life.



Figure 2.4.1 Communal fishing (Image. Courtesy: Mr. Tushar Mhatre)

A coastal fisherman’s life is full of challenges and hard work, but when a lazy, careless lad opts to be a fisherman and decides to make a living out of it, his father ironically says, “When my beloved son finally thought of working with his net (fishing); Alas, there is a

scarcity of fish in the sea!” (Gavali 2013: 365). The specific term used for fish scarcity in this proverb is *sukati*; nevertheless, this may be a reference to climate change and drought. While the father comments on his son’s idleness, the sea is a constant source of fish, but the idle and unskilled boy may return home empty-handed, unless he as a fisherman is not alert and updated about the weather. Only an inactive daydreamer would promise his family a tasty meal, and therefore it was only hard work and wisdom that was of prime virtue, “Fish in the sea is an assurance at home” (Bangar 2010: 36). The proverb assures the listeners that while the sea is full of fish, unless a fisherman goes fishing, his family would end up sleeping with an empty stomach. Another proverb demonstrates how an impatient person counts his chickens before they are hatched in terms of fish, “Fish in the lake are being sold on the bank” (Gavali 2013: 365), alluding to how the fish are sold even before they are caught. There is a tendency to be secretive about professional wisdom for fishermen reflected in “Give your fish but do not show the pothole in which it was found” (Gavali 2013: 358). This means that while generosity is not a problem, protecting resources is necessary. Hence, the need to keep the means of accessing resources a secret is professional wisdom. The idiom mentions river potholes, locally known as *konda* or *kunda*. These are deep holes naturally carved out from erosion, in rocky riverbeds that constitute a safe abode for fish. Often hidden in the watercourse or in rocks, such places are known to experienced fishermen.

Though public lakes are allowed for fishing, based on yearly agreements, this generates revenue for the local governing body. The lake is also cleaned and maintained by the stakeholders in charge. This traditional system, known as “To keep a lake” means commissioning a lake to a specific person, for a specific period of time (Chaudhari 2018: 284). In contrast, “To hunt a lake” denotes customary activities of communal fishing (A. Harad personal communication, September 9, 2017). This “hunting” is celebrated like a festival, with the entire village going fishing at a desired location or lake. This is mainly undertaken for cleaning local lakes and ponds to eliminate excess fish and the odour of fish. Sometimes excess sedimentary deposits are also cleared in this process, and the lake is prepared for the oncoming monsoons. In some places in South Konkan, where temporary dams are built for water conservation to cultivate winter crops, the end of the cultivation season in late summer, sees the wooden floodgates opened, since they cannot hold too much excess water. At this time, the fish gush out along with water, and are collectively hunted (Wairkar 2019: 28-29). In both cases, fishermen use standardized, indigenous traps or nets, and the proceeds of the hunt are consumed proudly as bounty, to reflect on the community’s collective achievement and success.

Traps and Methods

There is a remarkable variety of deep-sea nets that are used for fishing in coastal, brackish water. While the *pagera*, the *dola/doli*, and the *rampana* are huge nets, the *manasa*, *hari*, and *gholwa* are small or medium-sized nets specially used for shallow water fishing (Campbell 1880: 102; Puneekar 1959: 206-211). There is specific vocabulary regarding their function; nets, traps, and their usage are often encountered within

proverbs and phrases. Fishermen use the names of nets, not only as proper nouns, but as common nouns as well. Hence, instead of saying, "I am off fishing", a fisherman says, "I am going on *pagera*, or *pagoli*, or *rampana*". The *rampana* is a traditional large net chiefly used in South Konkan and requires a group of people to be operated. A fish-flock is first encircled by the *rampana* and later, the net is dragged to the shore with the help of end-ropes. The dragging has to be carried out slowly, carefully and with skilled precision. Sometimes fishermen do not take the entire net back onshore, but collect a limited amount of fish as per the demand (Bal and Deshmukh 1993: 73). A wise proverb says, "A single fish in the hand is better than a hundred in a *rampana*." It further explains that while a *rampana* full of fish seems tempting, once pulled onshore, it ends up reducing the cost of the haul. It is possible that the net tears or slips from the hand, and all the fish escape. Thus, it is important to have patience. A fish on shore might be worth a hundred fish that are in the net.

Nets as metaphors are also closely blended with everyday Konkani life, so much so that inferior quality of cloth is sarcastically called *pagera* – a fish net. While scolding, an elderly person may rhetorically ask, "Did you go with the *gholwa* when god was distributing wisdom?" (Chaudhari 2018: 265). *Gholwa* is a small fishing net operated individually, and needless to say, the idiom indicates an analogy of water leaking through the net, being akin to the wisdom of a foolish person, whose intelligence has leaked away! There is a specific vocabulary about fishing operations, for example, the *dola* are specific bag-nets that are used on large scale by fixing two poles in the ground about thirty meters deep in the ocean. A net is then tied to these poles and its remaining portion is spread in the direction of the tide with the intention of catching the fish drifting along with the high and low tides (Bal and Deshmukh 1993: 73). Fixing the poles and tying the net is an important task. While many *dolas* can be seen tied inshore and in the creeks, fishermen tend to steal somebody else's fish from his *dola*. Such theft is called "To lift a collection" (Kanekar 1963: 71-78). This proverb is metaphorically used among the Koli community to describe a situation when someone is taking advantage of another person's hard work. There are other widespread idioms about nets, like "A fish caught in a net" and "A fish caught in a hook" that are used in versatile ways to refer to prey, or an achieved target. Catching fish at night is associated with lanterns, torches, and petromax lights. Such fishing, carried out in rivers or in creeks, is referred to as, "To go with a light." Likewise, field crabs are collected at night with the help of a torch, especially during the monsoon months (Chaudhari 2018: 284). Another ingeniously simple, and commonly used inland fishing technique is locally referred to as "To sedate". According to this technique, the bark, fruits, and pods of certain plants are pounded, mixed together, and diluted into pond waters to intoxicate fish. While the literal meaning of *maja* in Marathi is intoxication (Molesworth 1857: 641), the term is used here for a simple but clever technique for catching fish, by using plant extracts to unnerve the fish first, and making them easy to trap. Seasonal weirs are constructed over a stream, narrowing waterways enough to trap those fish that are unable to pass through the narrowed gap. This horizontal weir trap is elevated at one end, where another supplementary trap or net is placed. Fish swimming with the water flow get trapped in this net (Campbell 1882: 54-55; Harad 2019: 727).

When water overflows the weir during heavy rains; this is referred to as “Kiva (weir) has overflowed” (Chaudhari 2018: 283), which connotes the excess fish that has arrived with excess water flow. Fishing tests one’s patience and fisherman need to spread a net, place a trap, and patiently wait till the fish are caught. Thus, the idiom dedicated to hunter-fishers says, “Fish for the one who sits, and a hare for the one who roams”. This means that the one who is tolerant, wise, and prepares to patiently wait beside the water, fixing his traps cleverly, will get a fish, while the one who is willing to wander tirelessly in the jungles will trap a hare (Harad: in press). In the case of inland as well as open-sea fishing, if the weather and a fisherman’s luck are not positive, it is possible that he returns home empty-handed. In such situations, a fisherman must be wise, philosophical and prepare himself for the worse, without allowing the situation to negatively influence his morale. An Agri (North Konkani) idiom exclaims, “Insisted on fish but lost his weight ounce by ounce” (Sakharam 2010: 103). Though fishing requires tremendous patience, it also entails waiting that if continues for too long, may lead to hunger and misery. Therefore, it is equally important not to drain your energy by waiting unnecessarily and be hopeful for tomorrow’s crop. Marine fishery is a risky business, and in the absence of life-saving facilities, poor and individual fishermen sometimes lose their boats or even their lives. This can be a huge setback for his family, succinctly portrayed through this Agri proverb, “Sometimes the boat won’t keep a rag in the house”. This means that when the only source of income – the fisherman or his boat is drowned, it destroys his entire household and family, not even leaving them a single rag (Bangar 2010: 37). Along with such risks, deep-sea fishing also involves a substantial investment that goes into buying sophisticated, mechanised boats, fuel, nets, and arranging for manpower. Such fishermen also have to wrestle with adverse conditions presented by marketing, storage, and climatic factors. Thus, many times, such fishing activities are joint scale ventures for which community ties are important. A proverb tells a story of two business partners whose argument for profit continued till the fish they had caught rotted, “A fish of partnership decays amidst” (Gavali 2013: 365). The proverb points to a trait considered common for Konkani is – being ill-tempered and argumentative, to the extent that it may at times, harm their professional relationships.

The Fish Itself

Proverbs also provide interesting information about the anatomy of fish. An old proverb for instance says, “Three stones in the *dhodakara’s* (fish) head” (Date 1932-50: 1764; Gavali 2013: 366). It is believed that there are three white stones in the head of a particular fish called the *dhodakara* or *dhodya* (probably a croaker), and though the literal meaning of this proverb differs, the proverb provides information about otoliths –white stones of calcium carbonate found in the inner ear of the fish. Ichthyoarchaeologists can usually estimate the age of the fish and their habitat through an examination of these stones (Joglekar 2015: 100). Besides this, there are frequent metaphors that liken the behaviour of fish to human nature. The proverb, “Neither in *ahir* nor fish” refers to the snake-like fish *ahir* that is a variety of eel (Gavali 2013: 366). Though the *ahir* is a fish, it is remarkable for its shape and movement, despite being an aquatic creature, it can also

wriggle on earth. So, there is a debate about whether it should be counted as fish at all. The proverb smartly considers the *ahir* a land reptile and distinguishes it from fish, and through metaphorization, refers to a person who is trying to ride two horses simultaneously—like an *ahir* who at once works on the land, and also fishes. Sometimes fishermen exaggerate their crop, but this tendency to exaggerate also runs the risk of getting them exposed and at the receiving end of comments like, “Caught a tiny fish and pretends as if it is a big hunt” (Bangar 2010: 36). *Kotya* is a small fish that belongs to the anchovy family, whereas the *jitada* (Lates calcarifer-Bloch) is a big hunt of the creeks. When someone catches the *kotya* and boasts that he has caught the *jitada*, others easily make fun of him, especially since catching the *jitada* requires a lot of manpower and organization. Proverbs also talk about how the incompetence of a fisherman may not only expose him, but also cause him heavy damage. For example, referring to the *mandeli* fish (Golden anchovy) that is tiny and commonly found, overfishing exerts unnecessary pressure on the net. If the crop is beyond carrying capacity, the boat may also get damaged. Such imprudent fishing is described by the proverb, “The boat sunk for an anchovy” (Bangar 2010:39). It explains that the entire boat sank for a small, common fish. It is a metaphorical expression for describing heavy loss for a worthless cause. Besides sea fishing, inland fishing also uses extensive and distinct vocabulary. In the coastal hilly regions for example, fish like catfishes, loach, garfish, eel, and others, migrate from creeks to rivers during the early monsoon going upstream and climbing rocky slopes, just for breeding. Their fishing is locally known as “Upstream fishing”. The proverb, “Migratory fish have begun ascending” is hence a message that conveys the beginning of upstream fishing season that sees fishermen crowding these streams (A. Harad personal communication, May 21, 2015). A proverb describing this hustle and bustle aptly says, “We reached after everyone was done (fishing)”. This is a remark that asks a fisherman friend to hurry up, or they would get nothing, reaching the stream only after the whole village had already finished fishing (A. Harad personal communication, May 21, 2015). At the end of the monsoon soon, the juvenile fish begin their downstream journey towards the creeks and shallows, and the late monsoon fishing that aims to catch these young ones is called “Downstream fishing”.

Fish Consumption

The Konkan is an abode of diverse ethnic groups (Jogalekar 1952: 455). Fish preparation and consumption practices among these different communities are tremendously dissimilar despite comparable geographical conditions, climate, and coastal access. In the case of edible fish, the initial differentiation between marine fish and freshwater fish is followed by the difference between fresh fish and dry fish, as surplus crop is salted, sun-dried, and stored over the year. Villagers buy the dry fish in bulk from weekly markets known as ‘the monsoon market’, and though this term refers to the purchase of seasonal groceries, the major share of this consists of dried fish locally known as *sukata*. During monsoons, when no fresh fish is available and vegetables are scarce, *sukata* serves the purpose of the main food of farmers and tribes. However, after monsoons, this is relinquished as the market receives fresh fish stocks. The proverb, “Eats dry fish, but

claims meat” refers to a penniless or stingy person who pretends to eat meat, but only eats dried fish (T. Mhatre personal communication, September 16, 2020). Further, a gathering of people with difference of opinions is called, “A combination of turtle and dried fish” (T. Mhatre personal communication, September 16, 2020). Cooking or mixing turtle meat with dried fish is a strange mismatch –just like an assemblage of people with disharmonious views does not portend a good outcome. Fish is a favourite meat in the Konkan. When people say, “The sea is set on fire” (Gavali 2013: 367), the word sea is metaphorically used instead of fried fish, as the aroma of fried fish reminds of the sea. Since fish and rice is a routine Konkani diet, people describe their liking for this menu as,



Figure 2.4.2 Process of drying Bombay Duck

“No rice lump without a fishbone” (Gavali 2013: 365). This means that the rice does not taste half as much, if not served with fish. A proverb that describes this best is, “Lady is from coast, gentleman from hills; the lady drags the gentleman” (Gavali 2013: 36). The coast gives fish, and the rice is grown on foothills. While rice and agriculture is metaphorically portrayed as the male element, the fish is the female element, and eating rice without fish is impossible. Even if spouses come from different backgrounds, together they make a good couple. In extension, men and women brought up in different environments are considered mutually complimentary and create a meaningful life, though it is the fish that rules the rice, the coast that rules the hill, and the woman

who rules the man! Another proverb from North Konkan, “Fish...no food”, means that when fish is cooked everyone eats so much, that the food falls short (A. Harad personal communication, May 21, 2015). Still, a miser tries to spend as little as possible is reflected

in, "A miser takes half a Bombay duck for *chutney*" (Karnik 2018)⁴. Bombay duck, is a fish that is eaten both in fresh and dried form and is relished by fish lovers. Easily available and economical and cooked in various ways, they are needed in large quantity to make *chutney* since they are small, fragile, and contain little flesh. Also, the *chutney*-spicy preparation with onion, garlic tastes awesome! And thus, this proverb points to a stingy person's attitude who is too miserly to even eat well (Harad: in press). Fish recipes, with specific spice concoctions, demonstrate the tremendous variation between Konkani communities, and such differences not only reflect regional or communal change and diversity but also, different social statuses. Conventional recipes are believed to be intangible heritage of the family, community, or even an entire region and for that purpose, they are sometimes kept a secret. A proverb from South Konkani warns, "Give the fish-curry; not the recipe". Similar to the proverb of not giving access to the pothole where the fish is found, even if one generously gives the fish away discussed above, this proverb too is not against feeding the hungry, but warns against sharing secret ingredients and recipes (Gavali 2013: 366), that in effect extends the interpretation of intangible heritage as a regional resource base. But naturally, though extensively dependent on fish as the primary food, preparing different fish recipes are tedious and time-consuming. Different fish is cooked in different ways. A proverb from North Konkani explains how a lazy housewife finds an ingenious way to make her task of peeling prawns easy. She calls her neighbour over and pretends to work hard in front of her. The poor neighbour extends a helping hand, and therefore, helps the housewife to finish her chores – expressed as, "Smooth-tongued, peels the prawns" (Chaudhari 2018: 252). It is a fine description of a talkative, but selfish attitude. Another proverb from South Konkani makes fun of talkative people saying, "An open mouth like the *tiraphala* (a spice)" (Gavali 2013: 358). *Tiraphala* (*Zanthoxylum piperitum*) is a pea-shaped spice that is specially used in fish curries. In its dry form, it pops open, with its internal seeds visible, that looks like an open mouth. Thus, the taunt is a metaphor for a talkative person, especially a woman. Fish curries are normally spicy, and thus being blunt in one's mannerisms is often compared to a spicy prawns curry preparation as, "Burning taste of prawns" (T. Mhatre personal communication, September 16, 2020). Since the fish roe is a much-loved delicacy for fish lovers, called *gaboli* in Marathi, a hyperbolic adage compares the size of a fish to its roe, "The fish roe is bigger than the fish" (Prabhudesai 2016: 203). If someone overstates the amount of *gaboli*, the listener says, "So your fish roe was bigger than the fish itself, wasn't it?!" This accuses the speaker of exaggeration. Another adage says, "A cauldron-full of curry with just one fish in it" (T. Mhatre; A. Harad personal communications), meaning that there is so much dilution in a situation that its essence is lost. But from another perspective, food is sometimes scarce in poorer families, and hence the curry is diluted for the specific purpose of feeding everyone. But in both senses, whether as a taunt or as a description of scant resources, the proverb indicates impoverishment.

⁴ For more information: <https://sukatayan.blogspot.com/2018>

Concluding Remarks

The Konkani environment directly affects the man-fish relationship, and the Konkani inhabitants have adapted to their natural ecology in ways that focus on their subsistence patterns within respective micro-terrains that have resulted into diverse cultural ecologies evolving within the Konkani itself. As Bekker-Nielsen put it, "In most societies, fish form a supplement to other sources of nutrition such as grain, vegetables, meat, etc., and the place of fish in the diet, and hence of fishing and fish processing in the economy, is culturally defined. Fishing takes place within a wide-ranging and complex pattern of interaction involving social, economic, cultural, biological, and environmental aspects" (Bekker-Nielsen 2007: 187). This can also be witnessed in the context of coastal Maharashtra, which is a cluster of diverse ethnic groups, living independently in different environmental conditions.



Figure 2.4.3 Koli women in the monsoon market

While the coastal fisherfolk are completely dependent on fishing; mountain-dwelling adivasi (tribal) communities fish only in a particular season, while the farmers see fishing

as an alternative to vegetables – they all feed, not only themselves, but also cater to a large economy created by fish-loving urban society in Western Maharashtra. Open-sea and inland fisheries are marked as corresponding features of the same food economy, with inland fishing providing an alternative to open-sea fishing in harsh monsoon weather. This is a time when rivers, small brooks, and rivulets are also revived and flooded, and there is abundant freshwater fish. For many adivasis (tribes), the monsoon is a season of additional income generation through fishing. Regional folklore aptly demonstrates the interrelationships between natural ecology and culture. Konkani fish-related proverbs and phrases portray a wonderful picture of fish-human interaction, additionally describing various micro-cultures through their reference to fisheries that describe fishermen, their nets, other tools, water bodies, and changing seasons. As heavy monsoons revive rivulets that gush into the sea; fish climb upstream and breed, resulting in their juveniles moving downstream to creeks. All the while, humans chase fish for their own livelihood, the entire scenario is perfectly mirrored in the proverb, “Migratory fish have begun ascending”. As soon as the rain weakens, coastal fishermen sail into the sea and creeks, work hard with the tides to catch big fish, and prove their skills as hereditary fishermen. Among regional caste communities, Kolis are prominent; sub-divided into Son Koli, Vaiti Koli, Mangela Koli, Karade Koli, Christian Koli, etc. Nonetheless ‘Koli’ is an all-inclusive term used for diverse ethnic groups, the fisherfolk Kolis are so blended with their occupation that the word ‘Koli’ is used as synonymous term for fisherman in Marathi (Molesworth 1857: 188; Date-Karve, 1933: 811; Harad & Joglekar, 2017: 121). Being an inseparable part of their life, the fishes reflect variously in their lifestyle and thinking. They eat fish everyday as a part of their subsistence, yet in various ways they keep remembering the value of fish in their lives. They consider fish their wealth, expressed through the proverb, “Fish is our wealth” (Harad and Joglekar 2017: 128). The dried-stored fish helps them to sustain the monsoon, with help from the freshwater fish brought to the local markets by seasonal fishermen, and the fish markets continue to remain full of fish-lovers. Various fish delicacies are prepared with specific recipes, and are served with the local crop – rice. Proverbs also provide us with information on regional dietary patterns, procedures, and ingredients. A very interesting proverb mentions the conversation between two ingredients of prawns curry, “Oh sister! Don't roam around at night. They (the humans) will see you and eat me” (Gavali 2013: 366). Creek prawns are generally caught at night, the curry is cooked with a specific sour fruit called the *ambada*. Thus, the *ambada* advises the prawn not to jump in and out of the water surface at night, as the humans who will catch it, will also cut the sour fruit off the tree the next day, to make prawn curry. Therefore, it is not coincidental that a region with plentiful fish has adages that often personify fish as humans, in an attempt to point to errors of the human nature and provide a commentary on Konkani social relations. The entire coast is attached with fish in one way or another, and while it is merely food for some, fish constitutes the livelihood for others, and yet for others, it provides professional recognition, and ethnic-regional identity. This diverse range of associations is reflected in proverbs and phrases in the local folklore and vernacular. Furthermore, ‘fish’, an article of consumption transcends its food context to become a part of regional and communal identity, further becoming a symbol of status, prosperity and even fertility in its feminine form in relation to rice.

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I thank all my informants, Mr. Tushar Mhatre, Mr. Mohit Ramle, Ms. Uttara Kathe, and Mr. Saeed Beg for sharing their knowledge of regional dialects and proverbs. A special thanks to my husband Mr. Avinash Harad for enriching my research with his knowledge of local concepts and terminology. And finally, honest appreciation for my friend Dr. Tanashree Redij for valuable inputs and endless discussions; also Ms. Rucha Urdhwareshe-Gharpure for thoughtful check through. I truly admire the common people who have vigorously preserved their intangible heritage in their own special way.

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Book Review 3.1

Suchitra Samanta (Foreword by Susan McKinnon). *Kali in Bengali Lives: Narratives of Religious Experience*. New York: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. xvi + 143. ISBN 978-1-7936-4633-0. Price: \$ 91.51.

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The famous eighteenth-century poet Ramprasad Sen (1718-75), an ardent devotee of the Mother Goddess Kali as well as a much-admired court poet of the Nadia king *Maharaj* Krishnachandra Ray (1710-83), sang his own lyric in a fit of mystical ecstasy “I’ll now gobble you up, (Mother) Kali” (*Ebar Kali tomay khabo*). While the *Kalisadhak* (no *Risi* or Saint, 16) Sen could not devour the dark deity but instead was consumed by her maternal love, Dr. Samanta, a native Bengali educated and employed in the US and the author of the book under review, appears to have conjured up a modern *Kali Kalkattawali*, to use a popular homely description in Hindi of the primordial goddess of West Bengal’s megacity Kolkata.

The author avers that she is uniquely qualified for her Kaliphilia, the goddess being the chosen idol (*istadebi*) of the Samanta household, her radiologist father’s dream deity. Additionally, she had already published a couple of articles (see Bibliography, p. 139: Samanta 1992b) on Kali the goddess and Samanta 1994 on *bali* or *balidan*—ritual slaughter of goats and buffalos as an offering – somewhat like *naibedyā* to the goddess. Nevertheless, it ought to be noted that these published works are more expository and explanatory than critical albeit somewhat informative overall.

Sadly, and puzzlingly enough, in the book under review, the author has unwittingly relied almost entirely on oral interviews conducted rather casually and carelessly. Her interviewees, designated as participants in her field research, seem to have been selected not by any systematic method (usually followed by social science field researchers with a view to ascertaining the background of these strangers and a set of questionnaires prepared carefully by the interviewer) but by connections and mostly recommended or procured by the Kalighat (the sacred locus of the celebrated Kali temple) priest Alopebabu (Alope Bhattacharya). The author believes that all her participants were conversant with Advaita Vedanta (p. 4). Most of them seem to have been regarded by her as great devotees of Kali who, habitually, converse with the goddess in their dreams.

The author should have made use of the listserv RISA (Religion in South Asia) for interacting profitably with fellow researchers in her field. As per my personal experience for over a quarter century, this forum famously circulated scholarly exchanges of informed opinions or ideological /political/theological differences within a parameter of professional courtesy and collegiality. Further, in my experience, foreign scholars and researchers also seek guidance and assistance from the university dons of the metropolis. Despite her natural advantage as a native Bengali, the author does not seem to have examined the resources of several specialist libraries and universities of the metropolis but gathered oral anecdotes of rituals, dreams, and sermons by her generally non-academic "participants." The author refers, *inter alia*, to them by their individual first names (presumably pseudonyms) as Ananda, Bani, Biswajit, Chandu, Debu, Dinu, Gautam, Goswami (identified by surname only), Sachin, Santosh, Prabir, Tarun *et al.*, including one Mr. Rabindra Mohan Roy (another participant having the distinction of being mentioned with his full name next to Alokababu. Then, the author's regrettable decision to use diacritics on some select terms and names and not on Bengali words in both *tadbhava* and *tatsama* category (p. 11, n. 2) has resulted in confusion as to the absence of subtle phonetical stress modifying the orthography in the transliterated version. The most pronounced example has to do *mon*, Bengali word for "mind" that has been spelt as "man," a misleading orthography for a book written in English but using Bengali terms.

The informants tell the interviewer that *bhakti* is "(see 'desire,' *anurag*, to know the deity, a matter of effort and interest." (p. 30). Effort is illustrated by a participant who had his "brain tumor" cured by his *guru's* channeling *shakti* to him by petting his pate. *Shakti* is human capacity that impels "any effort—toward the larger end" (p. 30). Towering over all her participants is Alokababu, "an often-irascible, reticent, and sometimes impatient man" (p. 63), who yells (at her) "in sharp reprimand... 'I don't speak of my God for money' (p. 64)." He hangs a plaque on his temple office wall "banning women," telling her they visit temple to gossip only (p. 65). He regards Kali as his "live mother, *iyanto ma*," because he "never received the love and compassion from" his birth mother (p. 66). He tells her a tale of his thaumaturgic talent by dint of which he had cured a man's boil in the ear by transferring the infection on to his own right ear, and in fact makes her examine a suppurated furuncle in it! (pp. 71 - 72). She, of course, never questioned his credibility but uncritically accepted his sermons and stories because, since her maiden meeting with the priest. She "did not wish to bear the brunt of his tongue" as she "needed him as guarantor, for access to the Kali devotees who came to his temple" (p. 64).

It is abundantly clear that Professor Samanta seems unaware of the scriptural and hermeneutical sources of Kali—her discussion of "Kali's History," (p. 15-17) purveys familiar information mainly culled from the work of Rachel McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal (see p. 135-140). Her use of original sources except her translation of Krishnananda Agambagish's description of Kali's image is noted nowhere else in the book (p. 1). Then, her oversight of some specialist monographs on this deity, for example, the works of John Woodruff, Ajit Mookerjee, Hugh Urban, Tracy Pinchman, as well as several others (see the list of authors in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kali>) is an unfortunate omission. A

careful perusal of Neela Bhattacharya Saxena's autobiographical account *In the Beginning is Desire: Tracing Kali's Footprints in Indian Literature* (2004) would have been helpful. The author also missed out on Arun Ray Chaudhuri's pioneering and magisterial essay "A Psycho-analytic Study of the Hindu Mother Goddess (Kali) Concept" (1956) and privileged the Ramakrishna scholar Jeffrey Kripal as an authority on the psychological understanding of the goddess's iconography, pathography, and ethnography (see Sil, 2015; see also Sil, 1996).

Suchitra Samanta nonchalantly accepted the stereotypical stories of dreams of the Divine mandating (*svapnadesh*), ministering, and micromanaging devotees' affairs without any sober and critical analysis. Her own mindset is clear in (to cite just one such instance, the book's central part (chs. 2-7) abounds in this type of reasoning) her endorsing the participant Debu's exegesis of "anubhuti as 'real' (*āsa*) because personally experienced. The words 'true events,' *satya ghaṭanā*, would sometimes follow such 'real' experiences. Their accounts were often emotionally recounted, suggesting how deeply moved they were by such experience implied" (p. 27; diacritics added). This quotation from the book appears as what Clifford Geertz (1973) popularized the philosopher Gilbert Ryle's notion of "thick description", but she failed to follow the Geertzian admonition to contextualize observation and conversation in field work and subject it to a careful cultural analysis.

As Dr. Samanta disarmingly declares about the genesis of her book: "(M)y own journey—as I know it—has...serendipitously...brought me to this book late in the day when I had long changed research interests to feminist inquiries on gender, minority status, and education, in India and in the United States!" (p. xii). We could conveniently divide her work of eight chapters in two parts into three broad sections of which the first section (ch. 1) sets out her thesis statement and the methodology of her field research and the third section—Conclusion (explaining the use of her field research. and Afterword serving merely as padding for the manuscript, are not too distracting. However, while the first section is promising and the third section comprising Conclusion and Afterword (somewhat interesting), the second part (chs. 2 - 7) is vacuous. Ironically enough, it is in the second part that the book's major contribution is located.

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Book Review + Interview 4.1

Chad M. Bauman. *Anti-Christian Violence in India*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 302. ISBN 9781501751424. Price \$34.95.

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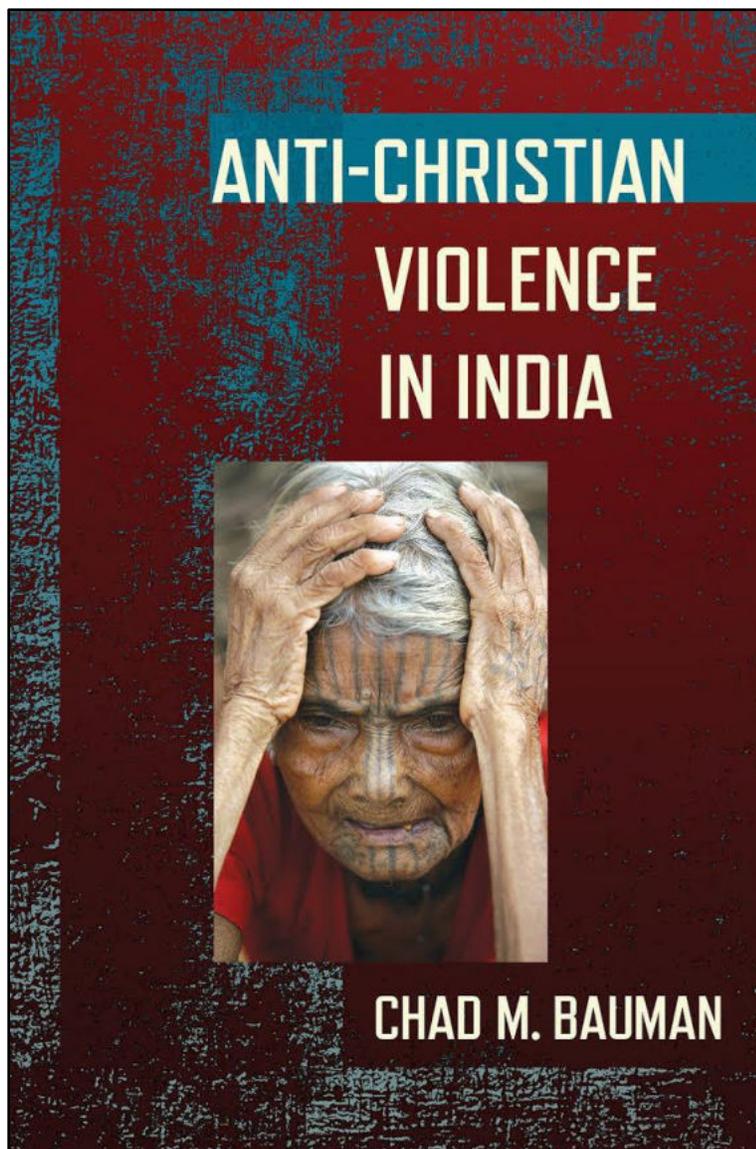


Figure 4.1.1 Jacket, *Anti-Christian Violence in India*, by Bauman

As one reads Chad Bauman's brilliantly perceptive book on anti-Christian hostilities in postcolonial India, one is flooded with a sense of familiarity, a *Déjà vu*. The book articulates realities that many of us who have grown up in India know in our bones – realities about India's politics that first produces exclusive, and antagonistic religious groups and then spawns violence between them (p. 19). Bauman articulates the precise nature of this aetiology, linking Hindu-Christian hostilities in India to the rise of global antireligious and interreligious hostilities. The rampant nature of interreligious conflict, and specifically, anti-Christian conflict in India almost makes it banal – something Bauman calls "everyday" (p. 4) – an endemic product of Hindutva in the last decade. Combining secondary literature, and interviews with 150 Indians, Bauman does a history of Indian Christianity through the lens of anti-Christian conflict, proposing

that the study of religion is unavoidably enmeshed with a study of politics. This obviously constitutes a model for other contemporary historians who want to do a history of other religious minorities in modern India through a history of contestation and violence. It also provides an analytical model for the history of interreligious conflicts in India, such as the Indian Partition of 1947 that saw large scale, and brutal rioting between Hindus and Muslims. Bauman identifies Hindu-Christian violence as located in the postcolonial confluences between Hinduism and Hindutva that commands all Hinduism to be subsumed under Hindutva. This not only threatens Christians, but also other religious minorities like Muslims – India’s largest religious minority, while also including liberal Hindus within the ambit of Hindutva violence.

The introduction chapter (Introduction: Anti-Christian Violence in Global Context) takes readers through various embedded theoretical perspectives on how Hindu-Christian violence is perceived. Bauman classifies these into three streams that interlinks the instrumentalist and essentialist, while distinguishing these from constructive interpretations that Bauman himself subscribes to. According to the instrumentalist perspective, the basis of interreligious conflict is material – competition over resources and political interest to secure these, based on the essentialist assumption that Hindus and Christians constitute mutually exclusive, and essentially different ethnic groups. This differentiation takes place at the expense of erasing similarities between Hindus and Christians on linguistic, class, or other lines within a microregion, while also erasing the differences inside Hindu groups, espoused as homogeneous under the rubric of Hindutva. Bauman asks pertinent epistemic questions in chapter one (A Socio-cosmological Approach to Anti-Christian Violence) about whether religion intrinsically causes violent conflict, whether religious conflict differs from other conflicts, whether violence is growing because it is appealing, and finally, what the extent of the RSS’s ideological relationship with interreligious violence in India is. In the light of these questions, Bauman outlines the importance of the constructionist approach for understanding religious violence as “Constructivists argue that while religion generally plays a rather small role, if any, in generating violence, it frequently plays a significant role in the framing, shaping, acceleration, perpetuation, or exacerbation of violence” (p. 28). Being a historian, I found chapter two (A Prehistory of Hindu-Christian Conflict) particularly interesting for its insightful combination of methodological tools used by scholars of contemporary history – oral narratives and secondary literature. In this chapter, Bauman explores how postcolonial demography has given rise to a politics interested in identifying and defining the conflicts between Hindus and Christians as ‘religious’, while often deliberately deprioritizing complicated, and intimate relationships between members of differentiated, and allegedly exclusive, religious communities. While this discussion is already significantly prefaced in the introduction and first chapters that has Bauman urging researchers to understand Hindu-Christian violence perpetuated by the Sangh, through the internal logic and voice of the Sangh itself: “one must listen with the Sangh’s ears (p. 11), it is the second chapter that the historical import and enormity of this methodological perspective is realized. This discussion is particularly expedient for historians of the Indian Partition when trying to understand the interreligious conflicts of 1947 that went into the

making of postcolonial India, as a product of politics from both Hindu and Muslim intellectual quarters that produced them as separate ethnicities, with a history of separate origins, genealogy, and culture that competed for space and resources in the microregions of Punjab and Bengal.

The book's core argument associates the Sangh's anti-Christian ideology to its resistance of global secularism and the values that Christianity is associated with in the West, that in extension is seen as benefitting Indian Muslims through precepts such as democracy and secularism. The global, Westernized origins of Christianity is hence, understood as privileging Christians worldwide, and converts in India, who then unfairly compete for resources with Hindus. The influence of global Christianity is, hence, pitted against Hindutva politics that considers its religion to be spatially and physically embedded in the local/ regional/ national territory of India. It is, thus, the very physicality of Hindus that is Indian – something that creates the Indian-ness of non-Hindus as ambivalently located. 'Tolerance' associated with Global Christianity, therefore, threatens traditional Hindu elites, since Christian proselytization assumes the presence of a socio-cultural system that denies the validity of a cultural tolerance that is internal to the Hindu religion. If analysed from an emic perspective, from within Hindutva, therefore, religion is central to Indian civilization that is considered an amalgam of culture, politics, and economy without internal differentiation – just as strong as the entanglement between Christianity and Westernized modernity. Proselytization is, hence, provocative, since it seeks to lure converts away from Hinduism and from being Indian, by bribing them with access to wealth and power within a globalized network that is denied to Hindus. Through localized skirmishes and riots, and its opposition to Westernization, Hindutva tries to break the global nexus of converts that produces Dalit Christians as the greatest victims of riots. This violence that is considered to intensify Hindu unity, only intensifies conservative, elite Hindu control. Moreover, Christians as 'foreign agents' who pose a 'threat' to national unity are primarily Dalit. While the Christian power of Dalit converts is sought to be controlled through riots and violence, Hindu Dalits are solicited to demographically strengthen Hindutva in return for their safety.

While chapter three ('Everyday' Anti-Christian Violence) provides a description of postcolonial riot incidents in India, chapter four ("Darkness, Loneliness, Loud Noises, and Men": The Riots in Kandhamal, Odisha, 2007-2008) and chapter five (The Social Construction of Kandhamal's Violence) focus specifically on the anti-Christian riots in the Kandhamal region of Odisha. There are some important learnings here that are applicable to a larger discussion about anti-religious minority violence in the Indian context. For example, Bauman describes how Kandha tribals participated as rioters along with Hindus, against the lower-caste, largely Christianized Panas. Though the Kandhas and Panas share a language, the two communities have become polarized with the Kandhas beginning to consider themselves superior to Panas. On the other hand, Christianized Panas are more-educated, and wealthy resulting in the formation of local jealousies, with Kandhas increasingly allying themselves to traditional, upper-caste, Hindu elites. Tensions between Christianized and non-Christianized tribal and lower-caste communities hinges

on a view that considers conversion and proselytizing as evidence of deculturalization, that creates competition in society, dissolving, and fragmenting earlier local collaborations between communities within the microregion. Furthermore, since persons of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) who convert to Christianity continue to receive reservation, this produces non-Christian SCs as non-Hindu, a position often resolved by contesting and opposing conversion. The conclusion of the book (*Conclusion: A Geography of Anger*) summarizes the arguments of the chapters, that presents upper-caste Hindus, and communities allying with them, as the largest beneficiaries of Hindu Nationalism. Placing conversion and proselytization at the very centre of Hindu-Christian violence in India, Bauman writes, "Throughout this volume, I have argued that proselytization and conversion are central to the conflict between India's Hindus and Christians because of the fact that they presume and perpetuate a post-Enlightenment, secular notion of religion as something individual, private, and portable, a notion that directly contradicts the way that proponents of Hindutva understand what religion is and should be, that is, as something communal and tied inextricably and immutably to one's land (i.e., one's ethnic and national identity" (p. 235). Anti-Christian violence is moreover on the rise in India, not just because Christianity is perceived as promoting a pluralism that opposes and undermines a materially entrenched Hinduism, but also because it is perceived as totalizing in terms of a 'monistic' secularist identity that is linked with globalization, global Christian power, and Westernized modernity.

Reading Bauman's book *Anti-Christian Violence in India* is an intense experience that is simultaneously familiar for many Indians, especially those of us, who continue to struggle in their understanding of postcolonial interreligious conflict traced to the Indian Partition. Brilliantly and meticulously encapsulated in its outlining of the complicated imbalances between community identity, power, and historical antecedents, the book, since it is also a political analysis, is a little bleak. Though it is hardly the task of a historian to provide solutions to the problematic of endemic violence, Bauman's analysis, with the book holding up a mirror to each one of us from India, offers little hope for Dalit Christians today who are largely at the receiving end of interreligious or inter-community violence. As regional tribal communities increasingly veer away towards Hinduism and Hindutva, consequently turning away from Christian SCs or Dalits, especially as the stigma of attacking Christians is whittled away through an engagement with Hindutva, there seems little hope of safety for Dalits today – attacked for being Dalit, and attacked for being Christian. Given the current scenario, there are only two alternatives for Dalit Christians. Either they swallow their humiliation and convert back to Hinduism, allying with elite Hindus and Hindutva; or then, they entertain the stark possibility of leaving the country like so many before them. Neighbouring Pakistan increasingly faces a similar problem with Christian minorities, who are increasingly accused of blasphemy. The case of Christian lady Asia Bibi, who was accused and convicted for blasphemy and sentenced to death in Pakistan, and only later allowed to leave the country for Canada, in May 2019.¹

¹ For more information, see the Wikipedia page on Asia Bibi's blasphemy case in Pakistan: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia_Bibi_blasphemy_case, accessed 10.12.2021.

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The imperfections of Western secularism are perceived to weaken Christianness. Thus, consequently, conservative Evangelical politics that undermines secularism strengthens Christianness, and American neo-colonial expansion in India. So how does one explain the Hindutva support for Donald Trump? Is Trump's conservative politics supported for its denigration of secularism, and for its conformity to the Hindutva lens of cultural-religious territorialization, if not Hindutva itself? So, then, is Hindutva's support for Trump's non-secular politics mimetic of Hindutva?

Because of his authoritarian tendencies and his rejection of interventionist foreign policy, Trump was—far more than his predecessors in both parties—willing to accept without comment or critique his authoritarian international peers' blatant abuse of their countries' political institutions, along with their use of the machinery of state power to quash political dissent. Not only was he willing to accept such abuse without comment or critique, but he seemed positively impressed by it. How else can we explain his almost adolescent infatuation with Vladimir Putin?

While their biographies differ in many significant ways, and while I personally find Modi's material self-abnegation preferable to Trump's obscenely performative opulence, their respective political *modi operandi* were, in my view, quite compatible. Each of them, from my perspective, seemed primarily intent not so much on improving the nation (though both claim significant successes in that

regard) so much as on entrenching and perpetuating their own power. While we may suspect that entrenching one's own power is the primary intention of politicians of all parties (in the U.S. as much as elsewhere), previous U.S. presidents' respect for democracy motivated them to critique what they perceived as their peers' abuses of power.

With Trump, however, there was no such critique. That served Modi and the BJP in several significant ways. For example, it removed (from the BJP's perspective) the annoying tendency of the U.S. to hector India about its democratic failures. Consistently, one of the implicit and explicit campaign promises of the BJP has been that it and it alone can restore India's national pride and dignity on the international stage. Cue a rambunctious "Howdy Modi" reception in America for the Indian Prime Minister, along with a chummy relationship between Trump and Modi, and *voilà*: mission accomplished; dignity restored.

Additionally, the silence of Trump served to embolden the BJP's bid to rather undemocratically, secure its own power by undermining the independence of the Indian media and the Supreme Court while imprisoning dissenters on spurious charges, often holding them without bail despite all manner of extenuating circumstances (e.g., age or health). It is hardly imaginable that any other U.S. regime would have had so little to say about such developments.

Finally, Trump shared with BJP leaders a Romantic conception of the nation, one that (for the BJP) goes all the way back to Savarkar, who, as has been oft-observed, admired the Nazis for this very reason. Far more than any U.S. President in recent decades, Trump conceived of and explicitly/implicitly portrayed the United States as a nation of White Christians, and saw most non-white, non-Christian citizens, and potential citizens (i.e., immigrants) as a threat to the soul of the nation. The so-called “Muslim ban” proposed by Trump emerges, in my view, from the very same Romantic impulses that inform BJP policy decisions, on, for example, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens. And while the white Christian orientation of Trump’s Romantic nationalism could have had negative repercussions for brown Hindus living in America in ways that should have concerned Indians in both countries, national leaders like Modi, who share a Romantic conception of the nation, seem to accept, and even expect, that their peers abroad will promote ethnically, racially, and religiously exclusionary policies for the sake of ensuring the continued strength of whatever group it is they perceive as their core national constituency, or, to borrow terminology from Jason’s *Citizenship in a Caste Polity*, as their ideal citizenry.

Christians and Muslims as religious minorities are often clubbed together and allied for being commonly at the receiving end of Hindutva persecution—that Muslims might benefit from “liberal” sentiments, imbricated within the rationale of Christianity. But what about

the terrible discomfort between Christians and Muslims? There is also the caste aspect. Many upper caste Christians (as you mention) prefer to ally with Hindus, rather than with Christians, due to caste identities being situationally stronger than religious ones. What does this caste alliance do to Hindutva?

My sense from talking to Christians in India is that on the ground there is not a significant amount of discomfort between Christians and Muslims. The same could be said with regard to Hindu-Christian relations, as well, of course. The tensions that emerge among these groups emerge, generally speaking, not from negative neighbourly interactions but rather from the intentional construction of religious others as political opponents (or at least as obstacles in the path towards some political goal, e.g., national unity).

It is certainly the case that the global “war on terror” has tinted perceptions of Muslims worldwide, while also making it easier for nations (like China) to justify anti-Muslim discrimination and oppression. Such perceptions do seep into Indian Christian rhetoric about Muslims, and recent news reports demonstrate that some prominent, upper-caste Malayali Christians have been parroting the “love jihad” line. But in general, I would say that Christian criticisms of Islam lack the urgency and venom of Sangh Parivar rhetoric. And the difference, in my view, has to do with the fact that Christians and Muslims in India are co-minorities. Moreover, majorities of both communities exist at the lower end of both caste and class hierarchies. They therefore presumably understand,

implicitly at least, that they have much in common.

The alliance of upper-caste Christian communities with Sangh Parivar politics strengthens the Sangh in a number of important ways. First, of course, the alliance adds to the electoral might of the BJP. Secondly, the alliance weakens Christian unity and thereby prevents the Christian community from protesting against its own marginalization with a single voice. As I discuss in this book (and did even more so in my earlier book, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India*) upper-caste and less evangelistic Christian communities often blame lower-caste and more evangelistic Indian Christian communities for provoking the attacks that target them. In doing so, they are of course mimicking common Sangh explanations (and justifications) for such violence.

Second, the alliance of upper-caste Christian communities with Sangh politics allows the later to bifurcate the Christian community into two distinct categories: "nationalistic" (=good) Christian and "anti-national" (=bad) Christian. Much as the myth of the model Asian minority in the U.S. is weaponized to blame Black Americans for their own economic marginalization, upper-caste Christians' alliance with Sangh politics allows proponent of *Hindutva* to claim that the ideology is not fundamentally anti-minority, and thereby to perpetuate the lie that minorities who experience marginalization or violence at the hands of the majority have brought it upon themselves (and, moreover, that those minorities who advocate for their own

rights are engaged in seditious, anti-national behaviour). If there are good Christians who fall in line, then there must be something wrong with those who don't.

Finally, there is the question of Hindus who are killed as proxy Christians. Rationalists and journalists like Narendra Dabholkar, Gauri Lankesh, and others were murdered in broad daylight for their liberal and secular activities, and called "Christians". Hindutva agents spread a lot of hatred against Lankesh calling her a Christian, which she is not. This is similar to liberal film-stars who are seen as Christian elements. Deepika Padukone faced it last year for supporting JNU students, and somebody dug out details about her new husband Ranveer Singh having a Christian grandmother. It was hushed up, due to Singh's connections with the Modi government, but these are proxy wars.

Fascinating! I was not aware of the construction of such prominent dissenters as "Christian." It is not surprising, however, given my argument that Indian Christians are rhetorically constructed as the primary purveyors and beneficiaries *of*, and targeted as proxies *for* forms of western secular modernity rejected by the Sangh. What is intriguing to me, given what you say, is how "Christian" now does the rhetorical work that "missionary" once did. In Sangh rhetoric up until more recently, the term "missionary" was used to denote particularly "foreign" and "anti-national" Christians (e.g., those who engaged in aggressive forms of proselytization, criticized Indian culture or Hindu religion, or deployed human

rights talk, etc.). At least in that configuration, there remained room for "Christians" who were neither foreign nor anti-national. If, as you say, that term is now regularly applied even to

demonstrably non-Christian dissenters, then troublingly (in terms of the security of Indian Christian communities), the conflation of "Christian" and "western secular modernity" seems complete.



Biographies 5.1

Gurupada Chitrakar: An Appreciation of a Life Short-lived

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Figure 5.1.1 Gurupada Chitrakar as he looked when I first met him in 2001
(Photo by and courtesy of author)

This essay sidesteps the conventions of the “academic paper” genre somewhat to provide the reader with a more reflexive, personal account concerning the life and career of a remarkable artist named Gurupada Chitrakar, a charismatic man with great talent who lived most of his life cut short in a tiny village located in East Medinipur, West Bengal called Naya (see Figure 1). Within that village, there is a neighbourhood of people known colloquially as Patuas or more recently by the more formal title Chitrakar, or picture maker.¹ They are a low-caste group of people who paint narrative scrolls and sing songs

about them for a living. The subject of my essay is a second-generation member of this community, and he was the first person I met when I landed up in Naya back in 2001, with the goal of researching his caste’s traditional occupation from a socioeconomic and performance perspective that would ultimately become a museum display and book. The project resulted in an exhibition at the Museum of International Folk Art located in Santa Fe, New Mexico that was inaugurated in the fall of 2006 under the name *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*, along with an accompanying book published under the same name by the Museum of New Mexico Press that year.

¹ Hauser (2002) plausibly argues that they only adopted the latter name in an attempt at upward mobility, due to their depressed status.

Gurupada was literally the first person I met when I stepped off the bus in which I rode into Naya for the first time, with only the name of the local school's headmaster in my pocket to serve as a reference of introduction. Sitting in a tea stall where the bus that runs from the railway station at Balichak to the market town of Mayna routinely stops in the village, he immediately spied me alighting and came running to greet me out of sheer curiosity, for it is quite rare for a tall, fair foreigner like me to be in such a remote location situated so far off the beaten path. He spoke very little English, and my Bengali was a bit rusty after several years of disuse. However, it was much better than the few words he knew in English, so he was relieved that I spoke his language.



Figure 5.1.2 The closing frame of Gurupada's Manasa pat, for which the late Abdul Kalam presented him with a presidential award in artistic achievement (Photo courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art (FA.2002.34.46.2).

When I told him why I was there, he immediately took me under his wing and tutored me in the ways and lore of his community. We became close collaborators and gradually friends. It was he who took me around to visit all of the various households of his neighbourhood (*para*) to introduce me to his bardic brethren who practiced the same traditional trade as he did, which was and continues to be painting narrative scrolls and singing songs about them. Later, he even assisted me in compiling a census of his community, which aided me enormously in getting to know members of each and every home in the village who painted and sang for a living, be it full-time or as a method for acquiring supplementary income. He would also later accompany me to Santa Fe for the opening of the aforementioned exhibition I curated.

When I first began the research, Gurupada was still a young man who had to defer to Dukhushyam Chitrakar, the “guru” of the Patuas, who taught most of them—both male and female—to paint and sing.² But over the years he became a leading spokesman for his community as Dukhushyam aged. Receiving a presidential award for one of his paintings of the snake goddess, Manasa, didn’t hurt either (see Figure 2). At the time of his death, just days before the opening of another major exhibition—this time at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur, West Bengal—he was being referred to as the “covid warrior” by one of the IIT team’s lead researchers. What follows is a brief account of Gurupada’s life and times based on my field notes and recollections, interspersed with quotations from his last formal interview.³

I chose to title my book “village of painters” because it struck me that so many painting families could all be clustered in one location. In fact, that is what drew me to Naya in the first place, even though Patuas reside elsewhere in Medinipur and other contiguous districts. It was Naya, however, that became the centre of Patua activity over time. As Gurupada put it, back in January of 2021,

Patuas have been living in Naya, Pingla for about eighty to eighty-five years. Before that, patuas didn’t live here, but in various other places. They gradually migrated to this village and now the population has increased manifold. The number of patua families staying here is around eighty. In total, there might be more or less 325 patuas here. They migrated from from Purba (east) Medinipur. They have, by and large, migrated from Purba Medinipur. Back in those times, there was just one undivided Medinipur. Now we have these divisions. We are from Paschim or West Medinipur and they are from Purba Medinipur. So, patuas came from that part of the district, especially from places like Thekuachak, Hanshchawra, Keshavbar.

² Traditionally, women did not paint and sing, but that changed as more and more NGOs began collaborating with the Patuas for social activist purposes. See Korom (2011).

³ See Indian Institute of Technology (2021) for the complete interview transcripts, Ghoshal and Roy (2021) for the background to the project, and Korom (2006) for a more in-depth study.

There's a beautiful narrative of how patuas came over to this place and settled down. Nowadays, we travel all the way to Kolkata in the morning, finish our work, and come back by the evening. The means of transport and communication have improved a lot. Back in those days, we didn't have so many varied modes of transportation. We had to travel either by foot, or in a bullock cart. Now, patachitra is a form of an entertainment. Earlier, it used to be displayed in different villages. Even till this date, it is displayed in villages in a similar manner. The themes usually range from the epics—the Mahabharata to the Ramayana, from the Mangal Kavya to the Mangal Chandi. While wandering about villages with their patachitra, the patuas came across the Vishaal family, here at Naya, Pingla. In contemporary society, the Vishaal family was pretty rich. They belonged to a rung lower than zamindars (landlords) perhaps. They owned quite a few acres of land. They were not as wealthy as a zamindar. Patuas, in those times, were highly respected and loved by all. Even now, you won't find a single community that looks down upon patuas. As patuas began travelling this far, it became increasingly difficult for them to go back home to Thekuachak. That is when the Vishaals began to put up the patuas in their spacious rooms. The patuas would come to Naya, stay here for eight to ten days, earn as much as possible, and then go back to their places. The Vishaal family started enquiring as to why they needed to travel to and fro for their earning. Compared to Purba Medinipur, the prospect of earning was much better here, in Paschim Medinipur. So, the Vishaal family gave away some land to the patuas and asked them to settle down. There's a Muslim belt situated within a distance of a kilometre from here. Even the Muslims loved our community a lot. These Muslims also gave away bamboo, hay for building houses. In fact, they brought all these raw materials on their bullock carts and even provided manpower as the patuas were trying to construct their houses. So, that is how it began. A few patuas started to settle down here and now the total number of patua families is around eighty. The patuas don't live on others' property now. They have bought their own lands.

Gurupada is here referring to the generation of Dukhushyam, who claims to be one of the first Patuas to settle in Naya. Gurupada was actually born elsewhere, but moved to Dukhushyam's village quite young, just like many other Patuas of his own generation. As he states,

My paternal family used to live in Shobong.⁴ This is my maternal uncle's place. My father was not that closely associated with patachitra. He could paint and also knew a few pata songs, though. But the songs he knew were very few. He was a mechanic. My maternal family has always been a family of patuas. I was born and brought up here. I have five older sisters. They, too, were born and brought up here.

⁴ Officially spelled Sabang, it is a village located in the Kharagpur subdivision of neighbouring West Medinipur district.

Like virtually everyone else in the *patuapara*, he learned his craft mostly from Dukhushyam, but instead of singing just the traditional songs based on narratives culled from Hindu mythology, he quickly and innovatively branched out to include what came to be classified as *samajik pat* (social scrolls). On this, he says the following:

Themes usually pertained to mythology. ...However, topics revolving around nature, environment and health were also present. The number of mythological patas was more in comparison to the contemporary social patas. Nowadays, the mythological still exists, but the latter has slightly increased in number. We have patas on health-related issues, on issues pertaining to the environment, pollution, natural calamities. ... I had composed a song on the topic "pulse polio" long back. We had radio sets. We didn't have television in those days. An advertisement regarding pulse polio used to be aired where (famous actor) Mr. Amitabh Bachhan spoke about the absolute need for polio vaccination. Even before those advertisements were aired, we, the patuas, had composed songs on this and used to wander about villages educating people about the same. We were also offered work by the former Left government. Not just me, but some other patuas as well. We had to promote awareness about some lesser worked upon areas like polio vaccination. But we were not dictated to by the government as to what had to be painted.

I had done the work completely from my own perspective. Even now, whenever I come across a significant event, I compose the song first. If the songs get accepted, then that's great. If they do not, honestly, I don't mind. In the year 1992, on the day the Babri Masjid/Ram Mandir got demolished, I was in Jorasanko, Kolkata. All of a sudden, a huge commotion was created. There was bombing, counter-lathi-charge by the police. I boarded a Howrah-Salt Lake bus and was trying to get to Howrah. But the conductor said that the bus wouldn't be going to Howrah; it would be going to Salt Lake. He also asked me not to get down because the situation was getting worse. So, I went to Salt Lake and put up at[a relative's place for four days. Communication wasn't that good, back in those days. There were riots everywhere. My family got extremely worried. They were nervous that I might have got caught in this volatile situation and perhaps lost my life. The entire experience made me compose a song – "Not hatred, but harmony." After four days, the curfew was withdrawn, and normalcy gradually got restored. I came back home that night. The very next morning, I went to a tea-stall here and began to discuss the entire event there. I sang the song I had composed in front of the Gram Panchayat (village council), for the Head of the village. He seemed so impressed that he took me to the Block Development Officer. The latter heard me sing and remarked that this song was of utmost importance given the current scenario. He drove me straightaway to the District Magistrate's office. When I sang what I had composed, he said that I should immediately be sent off to villages to promote the notion of communal harmony. I visited several places for this purpose.

There were several others too, who were appointed for the same. But the main point is that I was never dictated to by someone else as to what should be the theme of my pata. I also created a patachitra on HIV/AIDS, which was also appreciated by them. In fact, I participated in several programmes, and have travelled to places like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore. I have also visited South Africa, a country which has the highest number of HIV infected people. I have been to UCLA University, Los Angeles, USA. The thing is, when, I come across certain events, I compose songs and if the media accepts it, the patachitra/ songs are used for promoting awareness about certain ideas.

Here are my translations of two of the songs he mentions above that I recorded in Naya:⁵

Pulse Polio

Listen, listen mothers and daughters,
Oh, fathers and brothers.
Won't you listen to one thing I want to say?
Don't forget to feed children pulse polio medicine.
Don't forget to feed your children pulse polio medicine!
Polio's actual reason,
Will be my topic.
The child getting lame won't last,
If you forget to give it medicine,
I say, this disease won't go away by itself.
If you go to the doctor, nothing will happen.
Why don't you listen to this one thing?
Listen, listen mothers and sisters,
Oh, fathers and brothers!
Why don't you listen to this one thing?
Don't forget to feed your children pulse polio medicine.
Feeding the children pulse polio medicine,
There won't be illness; they'll get relief.
That's why wise ones are saying, "Why not listen?
If you feed your children pulse polio medicine,
And immediately bring them to the hospital,
No child will be affected."
Oh mothers, why don't you listen to this one thing?
Listen, listen mothers and daughters,
Oh, fathers and brothers!

⁵ The Babri Masjid song has intentionally not been included here, since I have already published a translation of it, along with a frame-by-frame arrangement of his accompanying scroll in Korom (2006: 42-43).

Won't you listen to one thing I want to say?
Don't forget to feed children pulse polio medicine.

Don't forget to feed your children pulse polio medicine.
If any (sick) one remains,
You have to feed it to them.
If not, the disease will never be exterminated from the countryside.
Oh mothers, if not, the disease will never be exterminated from the countryside.

Your children will be fine.
They'll remain healthy and strong.
Don't neglect all the children.
Oh mothers, won't you listen to one thing I want to say?
Listen, listen mothers and daughters,
Oh, fathers and brothers!

Won't you listen to one thing I want to say?
Don't forget to feed children pulse polio medicine.
Even from the first day they are born,
Feed them the pulse polio medicine.
Up until the age of five.
Even if they have a cold, cough, or fever,
The reason, however, is different.
Don't forget to feed your children pulse polio medicine.
Listen, listen mothers and daughters,
Oh, fathers and brothers!

Won't you listen to one thing I want to say?
Don't forget to feed children pulse polio medicine.
Listen, listen mothers and daughters,
Oh, fathers and brothers!

Won't you listen to one thing I want to say?
Don't forget to feed children pulse polio medicine.
Feed your children the pulse polio medicine.
After feeding them pulse polio medicine,
There won't remain any fear.
The Indian government has passed an amendment,
And after that, the state government (did as well).
Don't forget to feed pulse polio medicine.
Don't forget to feed your children pulse polio medicine.

(Author's field recording, January 2002)

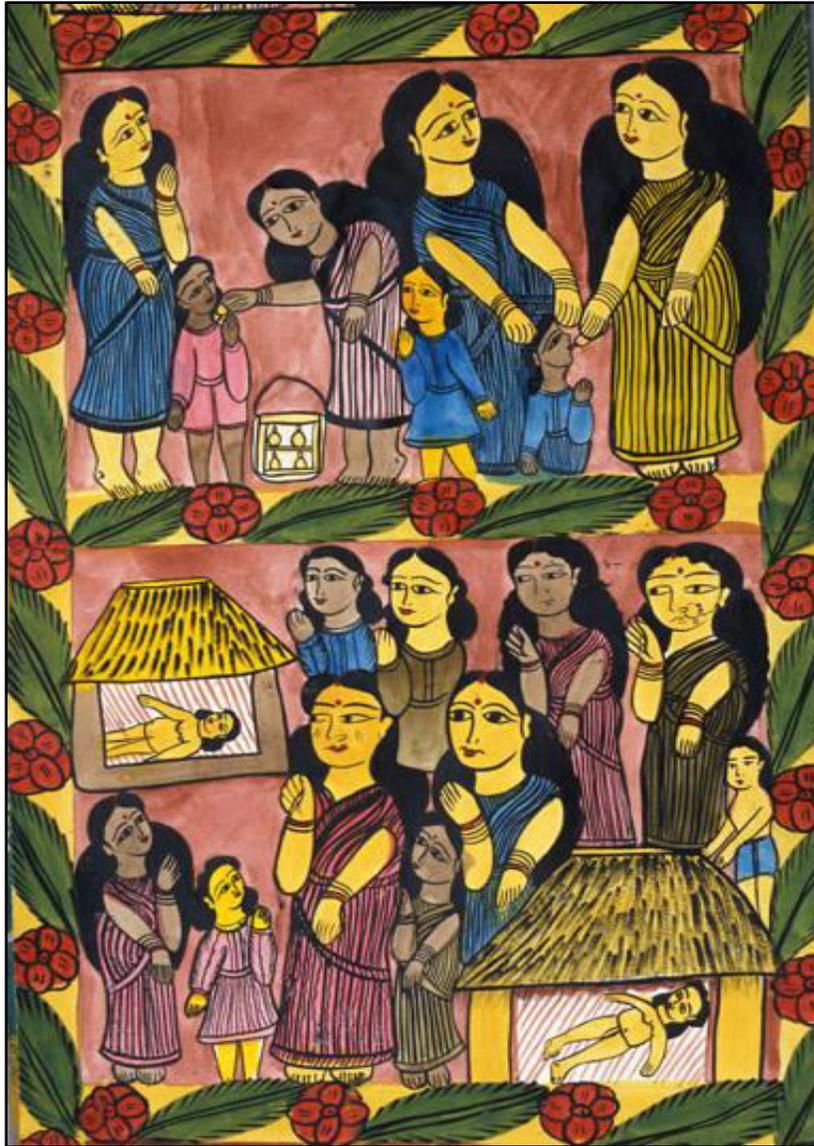


Figure 5.1.3 The third and fourth frames of Pulse Polio depicting village mothers with infants and children suffering from polio (Photo courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art (FA.2002.34.1.3)).

HIV/AIDS⁶

Everyone get together and be alert!
Listen oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
Unless you are cautious,
(You'll be) victims of danger among each other.
Unless you are cautious,
[You'll be] victims of danger among each other.
Disease will spread from home to home.

⁶ On the fascinating story of how the Patuas became involved with the anti-AIDS campaign in West Bengal, see Palchoudhuri, *et al.* (2008).

This disease leads to death. Listen, oh people!
Everyone get together and be alert.
Everyone get together and be alert.
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert.
This disease (*rog*) arrived from a foreign country (*bidesh*).
It spread from one place to another in our country.
This disease came from a foreign land.
It spread from place to place.
So many young people lost their lives prematurely.
Listen, oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
Everyone get together and be alert!
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
Sexual union of young men and women,
Reflects the AIDS disease.
Sexual union of young men and women,
Reflects the AIDS disease.
As it were just a sweet union, all suffer.
Listen, people, everyone get together and be alert!
If there's AIDS virus in the father's blood,
The disease will be contracted by the mother too.
If there's AIDS virus in the father's blood,
The disease will be contracted by the mother too.
It will spread to that baby too, listen my friends.
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
Everyone get together and be alert!
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
In case there are symptoms of fever, pain,
Go and get examined at the Health Centre.
In case there are symptoms of fever, pain,
Go and get examined at the Health Centre.
It's an appeal, go and get the patient's blood examined.
People, everyone get together and be alert!
If anyone volunteers to give blood to the patient,
First get the donor's blood tested.
If anyone volunteers to give blood to the patient,
First get the donor's blood tested.
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
If doctor *babu* gives an injection,
Get the syringe washed in warm water.
If doctor *babu* gives an injection,
Get the syringe washed in warm water.
Or request a new syringe whenever an injection is needed.
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
In case an injection is administered with an old syringe,

It may contain germs contracted from another person.
It may lead to the AIDS disease, which has these symptoms.
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!
If you arrange wedding matches for your son or daughter,
Then get the blood of both partners tested.
And afterward host the wedding; this is an earnest appeal.
Oh people, all of you come together and be alert!
Today the AIDS disease has assumed such proportions.
It is undamaging outside, but inside *phinish* (finish).
Today the AIDS disease has assumed such proportions.
It is undamaging outside, but inside *phinish* (finish).
Be alert that the patient is going to die and there is no missing (the target).
Oh people, you all come together and be alert!
Now all of you must take care; follow the doctor *babus'* prescriptions.
Now all of you must take care; follow the doctor *babus'* prescriptions.
No one should fall down losing sense after hearing everything, (say) the erudite
ones, oh people.
Everyone get together and be alert!
I beg the pardon of everyone. My name is Gurupada Chitrakar.
My home is at Naya in Pingla *thana*; this is my appeal.
Oh people, everyone get together and be alert!

(Author's field recording, July 2002)

Gurupada's repertoire was quite extensive. He knew dozens of mythological songs, but had added a significant number on historical (*aithasik*) and social (*samajik*) themes as well, like a song about the French Revolution and another on the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the latter of which after he learned about it in one of his sons' elementary schoolbooks. Here are two more translations of these two songs:

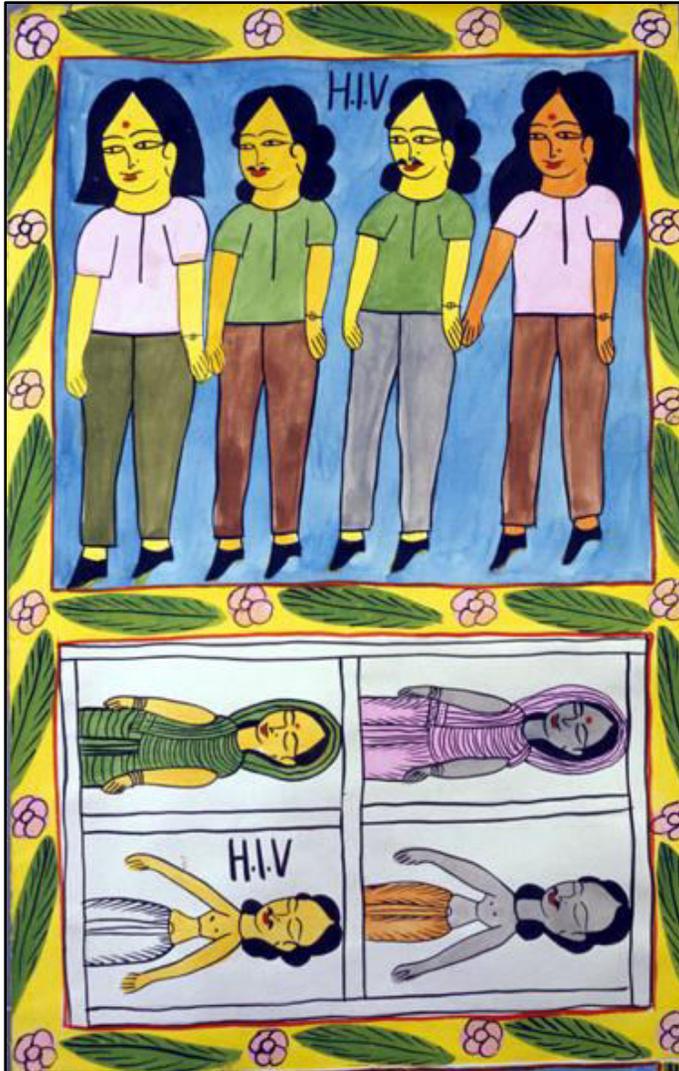


Figure 5.1.4 The second and third frames of HIV/AIDS, depicting young men and women in western garb holding hands in the top register, then lying sick (left) and ultimately dead (right) due to contracting the deadly foreign disease (*bidesher rog*) after illicit intercourse without protection (Photo courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art (FA.2002.8.6.2).

French Revolution

Everyone please listen to the story of the French Revolution!
 Oh, due to that country's King Louis' oppression,
 About half of the subjects died.
 Everyone please listen to the story of the French Revolution!
 France's king was named Louis IX.
 "He'll rule in happiness," say, thought the subjects.
 "He'll rule in happiness," say, thought the subjects.
 So, in this there is joy.
 I will describe all the details.
 The queen was beautiful; she was sublimely dainty.
 Her poem continues, hear the king's story.
 He isn't thinking about the people's peace.

There were so many ghouls in the government.
Listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!
Listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!
A son was born to one named Louis the XVI,
When that Louis the XV died.
When that Louis the XV died,
The XVI became the country's ruler.
Everyone please listen to the story of the French Revolution.
Louis the XVI's queen had a great name.
Austria's princess had no other work.
Oh, and in this there is proof!
I'll tell the details.
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!
The king and queen, together they both go for a horse ride.
They see a farmer's son playing on the road.
They see a farmer's son playing on the road.
Oh, the horses run over him.
Oh, the horses run over him.
There, the boy died.
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone.
If that king's dog would bite any of the subjects,
And if the dog complained, money would have to be given to the king.
And if the dog complained, money would have to be given to the king.
I'll tell this sad story to someone.
I'll tell this sad story to someone.
Oh, my insane mind!
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone.
A man by the name of Rusho Gyani lives in that country.⁷
Calling everyone, he said, "That's it!
Let's all go effortlessly.
Let's all go effortlessly.
We'll destroy that king's reign."
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!
Saying that, everyone worried.
Ruin the king's reign!
Ruin the king's reign!
This time, let the people's reign begin.
This time, let the people's reign begin.
We, no one will be prosecuted.
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!

⁷ It is not clear to whom Gurupada refers here. The name simply means "intelligent Russian," but when I asked him about the man's identity, he couldn't remember exactly but swears he got it from his son's world history textbook. It most likely refers to Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794), a radical Jacobin leader who was one of the principal figures of the French Revolution.

Everyone refused to give gold and money.
In the dark, the king and queen ran away.
In the dark, the king and queen ran away.
Catching them a little way away,
The king's reign was spoiled.
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!
They captured them, and one day made a contraption.
One by one they cut off their heads.
Oh, one by one they cut off their heads.
Its name is guillotine.
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!
In the year 1789 France became independent.
That country's citizens received a new life again.
They won't be persecuted anymore.
Please listen to the story of the French Revolution, everyone!

(Author's field recording, February 2002)



Figure 5.1.5 The fifth and sixth frames of French Revolution depicting the king and his queen, Marie Antoinette, escaping the palace in the upper register, with him being beheaded in the lower (Photo courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art (FA.2002.8.5.5).

Atom Bomb

Oh brother, what a strange business in America.
Oh brother, what a strange business in America.
Oh! listen to that story of the atom bomb!
Learning that, I almost died.
What a strange business in America.
In the year 1945, I say, they were to test that bomb.
In the year 1945, I say, they were to test that bomb.
At the end of the Second World War,
They dropped bombs on two cities.
What a strange business in America.
In that city Hiroshima.
And after (that) Nagasaki.
At the end of the Second World War.
At the end of the Second World War.
They wanted an atomic bomb.
What a strange business in America.
It began on the ninth of August.
Brother, everything was covered in dust and ash.
Brother, everything was covered in dust and ash.
Hundreds and hundreds lost their lives there.
They thought no one would survive.
What a strange business in America.
Oh, there was so much smoke.
To how many lands did that smoke go?
Brother, that smoke even arrived in their own country.
How many people of that country met their end?
He says, "brother, I'm not going, though."
What a strange business in America.
He was saved from destruction.
Their children became crippled.
Disease spread.
Many of them had no relatives.
What a strange business in America.
That's why however many women there are there and abroad,
They protested over the issue.
They say, "I'll go out all of the time.
I won't allow people to have bombs."
What a strange business in America.
Listen, listen oh wise brother.
Today, why are you all becoming so stupid?
One day your weapons will become unreliable.
Oh my, oh, residents of America!

One day your weapons will become unreliable.
On that day, though, no one will survive.
What a strange business in America.
That's why everyone (should) get together and worry.
(and) Ban all of these weapons.
Oh, this is our cleansing of mankind!
They should be introduced in this way.
What a strange business in America.

(Author's field recording, June 2002)



Figure 5.1.6 The fourth and fifth frames of Atom Bomb, showing the blast's flash in the upper register with American scientists watching, while people protest in the war's aftermath in the lower one (Photo courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art (FA.2002.8.9.4)).

Since the mythological (*pauranik*) songs are considered to be a part of tradition, they cannot be altered, but *adhunik* (modern) scroll songs are more idiosyncratic, allowing for more innovation and variation. Gurupada's opinion is that,

...meddling with tradition is forbidden. Whatever our forefathers have written was not incorrect. The lyrics were not incorrect. Even the tune was not incorrect. I don't know what the others think. Our opinions may vary. But I believe, nothing was out of place—neither the lyrics nor the tune. ... As I already mentioned, I have composed patas on topics like HIV, polio vaccination, communal harmony, personal hygiene (the use of toilets), prohibition of child marriage, gender equality. All these patachitras have an educational value as well as an entertaining value. Anyone who hears them would like them. ... Both are good.

The market demand is high for both these patachitras. On the other hand, it can also be said that there's no demand for either of these. If, for instance, a patua sings only at social events, s/he will be asked to leave the stage. But then another patua might perform a song at yet another social event and garner great appreciation. The fact is that music is God-gifted. You cannot be an artist until and unless the Goddess of Music (Saraswati) showers you with her blessings. If a gifted patua begins singing, he'd be able to capture the attention of a huge audience. But if he cannot sing, even a crowded auditorium would start thinning. So, both mythological and social patas have an equal demand. Both are good.

Over the years during which I worked with him Gurupada held an ambiguous view about the capitalistic nature of his craft. On the one hand, he and his community are impoverished, yet on the other, they hesitate to commoditize their work, despite the fact that they know it could uplift them economically.

Now let me tell you what I feel. Whenever I come across a certain event, and I feel that people might be entertained or benefited from this, I start composing songs, painting patas and singing aloud. If any patua would want to learn that song from me, I wouldn't sell it. Earlier patuas never sold their songs. They would simply pass down a song from generation to generation—much like the teacher-disciple relationship. I have been able to hold onto this practice. I don't know how long I'll be able to maintain this in this society of insatiable materialistic thirst. I had learnt this from my guru. I had learnt it for a vocational purpose, and there was no monetary transaction between my guru and me. If someone comes to me and asks for the songs that I have composed, I teach them my songs free of cost. I also narrate how the accompanying picture ought to be so that there's some parity between the picture and the song. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold onto this practice. But if someone dictates to me to do a particular patachitra, I will never be able to do that. I have never painted that way. I never will.

Gurupada therefore upholds what his community refers to as the “creed” of the Patuas, which dictates that they should always be honest and tell the truth, without “selling out” for monetary gain.⁸ This is why he grew more and more anxious as he aged. His community made great socioeconomic strides over the two decades since I began my work with him and the others, but there was still an underlying sadness that came along with more material prosperity. As he opines,

There are two sides to the story. The number of patuas have increased but the feeling of brotherhood has decreased. The number of painters have increased but the songs have decreased. The market value has increased but the sense of satisfaction has decreased. Back then, their market value was comparatively less but the idea of brotherhood amongst the patuas was very strong. People were poor then, but they had an abundance of love. These are the two sides. So, with the increase in the number of patuas, the sense of fraternity, the songs, everything seems to have diminished. Patuas have won world-wide fame. Starting from a small village like Naya, patuas have carved out a niche for themselves not only in the national but also in the international domain. But what I personally feel is that the strong bonding between us has got affected. We are earning a lot and yet our thirst for materialistic things seems insatiable. I might sell off a pata for a hefty sum (one lakh [100,000] rupees) but the very next day I might regret my decision. At the back of my mind, I might keep contemplating that I could have sold it for yet another lakh. This demand, therefore, never gets quenched.

Money, for him, is filthy lucre, which is eroding the tradition. Like Dukhushyam, his elder, Gurupada sees his inherited tradition in decline. On the issue of predicting the future survival of his trade, he holds the following opinion:

In my opinion, it’s pretty difficult. Firstly, the way our predecessors have toiled, or even the hardships that we had to face was immense. I won’t comment about others. I’d reserve my comments only for my sons. I have got three sons. They know the songs. But honestly, if they start singing, everyone would flee. Judging from that point of view, the survival of patachitra would be a miracle. We have a huge fair every year—the Potmaya (*patmaya*). There at Potmaya, we once found a person in a prim and proper dress—wearing a suit, tie, boots, and glasses. He suddenly got up on the stage and started performing. We realised that he was a baul (itinerant singer). So, the essence of baul was completely missing. This is how things would gradually turn into. Even many patuas have become like this. They are only bothered about the apparent glitz and glamour. So, I have severe doubts regarding how long they’ll be able to maintain the tradition, or how exactly will they be able to contribute to the next generation.

It would get extinct very soon. As I have said, the income might have increased but the pursuit for materialistic pleasures has increased too. What would they

⁸ See Korom (2006: 9) for my entire translation of their creed.

contribute to the next generation? Are we only occupied with ourselves? Are we doing this only for ourselves? Had our forefathers been this selfish, we would never have achieved this status. That is why I have written a few lines: "Please think over it and answer. What have you given to society? The fathers of all daughters are dying a slow death. The fathers of all daughters are dying a slow death. Their daughters would have to move to their in-laws' house. Society has given so much. Even then, how can someone ask for dowry? Society has given so much. Even then, how can someone ask for dowry? Hearing this fills one with shame. What have we given to this society? Women are at par with men. They are equally educated and have jobs. Women these days are working as pilots as well. Despite everything, some men still ask for dowry, for marrying such qualified women." Isn't this shameful? All the words are deeply meaningful and true. If you find a single meaningless word in my songs, the entire structure would collapse. Also, people would pelt stones at me, during my stage performances, if I were to sing meaningless songs.⁹



Figure 5.1.7 Gurupada at home working on a painting in 2005 for the 'Village of Painters' exhibition, in which he was a featured artist (Photo by and courtesy of the author).¹⁰

⁹ I have discussed their dilemma confronting modernity in Korom (2014, 2015, 2017).

¹⁰ For an earlier and briefer homage to him, please see Korom (2021).

By the time I read the interview from which these excerpts were taken, Gurupada had already been diagnosed with the coronavirus, which his community associates with a demon (*asur*), like they do with so many other diseases and natural calamities that occur more and more regularly among them.¹¹ He had contracted it from one of his sons and his daughter-in-law, but was already suffering from a variety of other so-called “co-morbidities,” which gradually led to his decline. In a newspaper article published very close to his death, he desperately noted how his government stipend was taken away due to shortfalls created by the economic crisis brought about by the lockdown to fight the demon. When he was finally committed to the hospital on June 29, 2021, complaining of severe stomach pains and being unable to breathe, he was worried about his eleven-member family, eight of which are following in his footsteps. He never returned, passing away at the tender age of 56. The eight surviving painters who sing now must provide for the others as he did. Let us hope that they can prove his pessimistic evaluations of their talent wrong. *Jai ho*, Gurupada! You shared knowledge and joy with the world through your performance art and powerful voice. May your memory be a blessing to us all: *‘Innā li-llāhi wa-‘inna ‘ilayhi rāji‘ūn*.¹²

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¹¹ See, for example, Korom (2019). Literature is already emerging on how the Patuas have been coping with the pandemic brought about by *karonasur* (corona demon), as in Zanatta and Roy (2021).

¹² It is only appropriate to end on a somber note taken from the Qur’an (2:156), since Gurupada and his brethren’s ancestors converted to Islam *en masse* when Bengal was becoming Islamicized from the 14th century onward. Known as the *‘istirjā’*, it is recited when receiving bad news to remind the faithful that all belongs to Allah and to him we shall return.

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Biographies 5.2

Seeking Social Justice: Gail Omvedt through Her Works

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Gail Omvedt (1941-2021) has left a rich and varied body of research work that consistently examined the actions, aspirations, and practices of the marginalised classes of India. Beginning with her doctoral work on cultural conflicts in colonial India, undertaken in early 1970s, Omvedt persisted with her special focus on Dalit life world, exploring their histories, ideologies, and politics. Right through her career, Omvedt defied the established academic frameworks, working largely from within the lifeworld of the Dalits, women, and peasants, developing new frameworks and tools suitable to make sense of the dynamics of her chosen area - caste and gender in Indian society. From an early stage in her career, she seems to have found the established analytical frameworks of Marxism and feminism inadequate to deal with the situations in India. She also deviated from the entrenched protocols of sociological research by weaving in historical, political, and cultural analysis in her sociological work. Likewise, she approached history through the lens of sociology. Ignored by the academic sociology circles initially, her work always resonated with widespread readers resulting in many of her books running into multiple editions. The value of her contributions may be sensed not only by the fact that her books are now prescribed materials for academic studies in universities, but also by their popularity among social activists.

Gail Omvedt's writings differ from the usual academic writings because she got involved with the movements about which she wrote. For example, her book *We Shall Smash this Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* was an outcome of her dialogues and debates with women's groups, feminists, female labourers, students, domestic workers as well as her participation in their grassroots movements. Writing in the bulletin of the "Indian Cultural Forum" on August 31, 2021, Uma Chakravarty has observed, "Gail managed to combine extraordinarily intense activism with an intensely engaged scholarly life, always in and around caste, patriarchy and the deep divisions in Indian society." Her writings strengthened the fledgling women's movements in the India of the 1980s by shaping the movement's perception of women's subordination in family, work-place, and other spheres. Gail argued that although gender-based exploitation and cultural oppression are both real, they are not the same. She pointed out that 'upper-caste' women faced

domestic oppression, but women from dalit communities, lower-caste groups and labouring classes were oppressed by social patriarchy, by which she meant that the whole society took patriarchal attitude towards them. Land, caste, class and gender issues are at the center of Gail Omvedt's scholarly and journalistic writings of over five decades. She wrote consistently about Jotiba Phule, B R Ambedkar, Periyar Ramasamy and Iyodhee Thass and has translated the poetry of such Marathi poets of the marginalised groups as Tukaram and Chokhamela. She studied the history and cultural practices of the marginalised classes of India and wrote about their traditions, cultures, economic status and political aspirations. She formulated important theoretical frameworks about Phule-Ambedkarism, 'lower-caste' literary discourses and Dalit ideologies. Her first major publication was in 1976: *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930*. This book studies the history and ideas of the emancipatory movements of the marginalised castes in India. She argues that, during this period, the social revolt was not aimed only at the colonial rule; that there was also a struggle for hegemony among the 'upper-caste' communities and the marginalised classes of the 'lower-caste' communities. She points out that the elites of the dominant communities (Brahmins and traders) stake a claim to be the sole representatives of the Indian nationalism through their anti-colonial activities as well as their attempts at social reformation. They took advantage of colonial education policy and took up occupations in bureaucracy and trade thus increasing their influence. Against this backdrop, she shows how the elite of the oppressed and non-hegemonic caste-communities came into conflict with the hegemonic 'upper-caste' communities to get a toe hold for their socio-economic advancement. While these conflicts often were based on local, regional, or religious identity, they reveal, she argues that, during the colonial period, the conflicts underway were as much cultural, seeking social hegemony, as political, addressing colonial misrule.

Gail Omvedt's *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (1979) studies the political mobilisation and action by women of various classes and backgrounds such as agrarian farmers, housemaids, tribal women and so on. Omvedt took active part in the movements of the peasant-women organised by the Lal Nishan Party in the 1970s in Maharashtra. The book focuses on issues such as exploitation and institutional forms of violence faced by women. She portrays the range of political roles assumed by women in rural India and shatters the myth that women do not know their own interests and are hesitant to resort to protests to assert their rights. In her 1991 book *Violence Against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India*, Omvedt considers rape, dowry, and domestic violence as tools of patriarchy in India. She examines the theoretical premises shaping the emerging women's movements. Combining the analytical frameworks of Marxism and radical feminism with that of Marx-Phule-Ambedkarism of Sharad Patil, the views of Sharad Joshi of the peasant movement, and that of eco-feminist Vandana Shiva, Omvedt describes the interconnectedness of economic distress, environmental destruction, religious fundamentalism, and caste-class exploitation. In a major study published in 1993, *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition of India*, Omvedt examines the social mobilisations taking place beyond class identity under the rubric of gender, caste, tribe, and environmental consciousness and

historicises the social movements in India between 1972 and 1992. As in her previous works, in this work also she criticises Indian Marxism for ignoring caste as a specific category of social analysis. According to Omvedt, the peasant movements, women's struggles, and anti-caste protests in Maharashtra during this period indicate that class, caste, and gender are interrelated. Omvedt's book, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution in India* (1994), examines the democratic movements that have taken up the questions of the Dalits with case studies from Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. She critically examines the historical and material contexts of the diverse approaches taken by three political movements: Ambedkarism in Maharashtra, Communism in Andhra Pradesh, and Gandhism in Karnataka.

To provide an overview of some of her other important works, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (1995) is a book which studies the directions chosen, the paths traversed, the ideologies configured, and the alignments forged by Dalit movements. Through a study of the philosophical works of thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar, Tarabai Shinde, Mango Ram and Periyar Ramasamy, Omvedt, in this work, describes how the Dalit movement constituted an ideological alternative to the hegemonic discourses. After that, the book *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*, published in 2003, traces the historical origins and development of Buddhism, its socio-economic and cultural background and the religious-ideological tendencies with which Buddhism had to contend. Omvedt discusses the Buddhist interpretation advocated by Ambedkar and its significance in the liberation of the Dalits. Importantly, this work illustrates the possibilities that Buddhism can provide for social reconstruction. Omvedt's work *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals* depicts the ideas of caste-class-less society explored by diverse writers over five centuries. The works of Chokhamela, Janabai, Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Phule, Iyodhee Thass, Pandita Ramabai, Ambedkar and Periyar are analysed within the framework of idealistic imaginations of society. The significance of this work lies in foregrounding the long history of utopian thinking among the anti-caste discourses in India and charting their distinction from similar imaginations in the works of M K Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Finally, Omvedt in her 2011 book *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond* questions the tendency to undermine the age-old anti-caste discourses in India. She brings together the ideas of the anti-caste discourses of the colonial period to challenge the upper-caste hegemonic ideas. She points out that the two main kinds of anti-colonial discourses, the spiritualist approach of Gandhi and the secular approach of Nehru, are not entirely free of caste consciousness. These are challenged, Omvedt argues, in the ideas found not only in Phule and Ambedkar but also in such living traditions as Bhakti, Lingayat, Tamil Siddha, Varkari, as well as in Adi-Dravada, Adi-Andhra, Adi-Karnataka movements.

Omvedt's anti-caste writings provide immensely useful theoretical and intellectual resources to social movements in India especially to those seeking social justice. V. Geetha in her tributes published in RAIOT on 26th August 2021, identifies Gail Omvedt's significance by pointing out that, "she remained a purveyor of anti-caste politics in the present, even as she wrote of its pasts, of Phule and Shahu Maharaj, and subsequently

of Ambedkar...". She goes on to note the diverse intellectual paths Omvedt pursued and says, "...various sites of sojourn, whether feminist, Marxist, Phule-Ambedkarism, were united in their vision of utopia: a world that ought to be rendered real, in times to come, but for which one needs to labour in the present." Her writings record many stages of the anti-caste, peasant, women, and labour movements and provide frameworks for analysing and understanding them. The common thread running through her academic research, activism and intellectual contributions is social justice. It is significant that her works are shaped primarily by the ideas of the Buddha, Kabir, Phule and Ambedkar. Omvedt's life and writing will prove to be an extremely valuable intellectual resource for those who care about the future of India, and care about the interests of India's Dalits, peasants, women, and workers.

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Biographies 5.3

And We Met...

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Till the horizons
There was only
Barren land
And parched soil.
No crop, no water
Only tears in the eyes.
There we met...
An ocean blue-eyed young white girl
And a thick black long haired
teenager.
In this drought,
She dreamt of Begumpura

It was 1973. There was a horrifying drought in Maharashtra. No rains, no grains... Even to fetch drinking water, women had to walk miles together with no guarantee of returning with even half a pot of water. In such horrible times, Gail Omvedt, a young girl with blue eyes, blonde hair and a guitar in her hand and I met at the Lal Nishan Party office (Communist Party Office) for the very first time with my father Bhaskar-rao Jadhav. Senior comrades of LNP welcomed her to a small office. It was above a small hotel. The office had oily chairs and overhead was a hot tin roof. The place was surrounded by old temples of many Hindu gods. Though full of old dusty files, red flags scattered around and the crowd of workers, landless labourers, sanitary workers rushing in and out, the place strangely attracted Gail. The hot flames from the stove of the hotel below heated up the walls and the floor of the office. Even then she looked pretty much at ease. Senior comrades of LNP - Datta Deshmukh, Santaram Patil, Madhukar Katre, Suresh Gawali and Bhaskar-rao Jadhav welcomed her. My father believed that social life and family life go hand-in-hand. So, every visitor of LNP stayed at our place. Gail was no exception. After her stay with us, we remained friends throughout our life till she gave her body to this soil.

During this trip of hers, Gail wanted to visit the drought-affected areas of Ahmednagar district. She wished to talk to women, workers, and landless labourers. Language was a barrier for her. So, I, originally a student of the American Mission School, who knew some English, was deputed to go around with her as a translator. We travelled by our local red bus, and moved around the secluded parts of my district. There, workers, especially landless women workers, and even small farmland owners were working on the government scheme called *Rojgar Hami Yojana* (Wage Guarantee Scheme) which provided work for them in constructing roads, small dams, drainage related work etc.



Figure 5.3.1 Omvedt, Patankar and Family. Photo courtesy: author.

We could only talk to these workers in the evening when they got back home from work. We sat with them on cow dung covered floor of the kitchens while they cooked near a hot stove. Gail was never uncomfortable. She could always connect with them and understand their problems, sorrows, and pain. The kind of questions she asked women were: "Do you get equal wage (as men) for equal work? Where do you keep your children while working? Who cooks at home when both husband and wife are working? Do your children go to school? Do girls go to school? Does your husband or the men in your family drink liquor? Can a widow remarry in your family? Can a divorcee or a single mother stay with her parents along with her children? Her questions often surprised those women, and their responses were in the form of tears more than words. In this manner, she befriended those women in her very first meeting. Gail

used to record all the conversations on her small tape recorder, and she made the women listen to the whole conversation again. This ease in conversation gave us extra strength to visit more places. Back in USA Gail broadcasted these recordings in an interview given to a U.S. radio station, to initiate a global conversation on the issues of toilers in India. These simple questions that Gail asked were to become pioneering issues raised by the Women's Liberation Movement in Maharashtra and India. The issues raised were: equal wages for men and women, necessity of day care at workplaces, need of law against domestic violence etc. She tried to handle the basic issues of gender equality, economic

independence of woman, right for remarriage, special facilities from government to widows and separated married women, equal right in property for women etc. Gail was not only a social scientist, an academic expert but also a woman with a strong dedication to the cause of other women, Dalits, and workers.



Figure 5.3.2 Omvedt and the author. Photo courtesy: author.

Gail visited India for the first time to study about the Satyashodhak Movement (Truth Seekers Movement) of Jotiba Phule (called affectionately Mahatma Phule) and to pursue her PhD research titled, "Cultural Revolt in the Colonial Society". During her stay, she lived in the commune of LNP Bombay in Dadar. This commune was a place where comrades from all classes and castes stayed together. Gail could experience the issues of different unions like the *Kaapad Kamgar Union* i.e., Mill Workers Union, Industrial Workers Union from cities and the unions of unorganized workers, peasants, landless labourers, sweepers from the villages. She could do this because of her stay in the commune. This helped her become an active part of the movement at the grass root level.

Gail was Swedish. She was born at Minneapolis in Minnesota. Her grandfather and parents worked for the Democratic Farmer Labour Party at regional level. As an

inheritance of revolt against oppressive practices, Gail herself was a part of the then anti-racist student movement of USA. During the Vietnam war, she was a frontline activist of the anti-war campaign. During her stay in India, she got connected with 'Magowa' (quest) - an organization based on the principles of equality and justice formed by a group of left leaning, highly educated youth who started working among the tribals. While working with 'Magowa', she met Bharat Patankar, a practitioner of medicine, who had also started working with LNP in Bombay (Mill Workers Union strike of 1982) and who had stayed with Gail in the commune of Dadar. Gail and Bharat fell in love and decided to get married. A senior comrade of LNP Leela-tai Bhosale and A.D. Bhosale solemnized their court

marriage at their residence in Pune city. Gail thus became the daughter-in-law of a well-known social activist Late Baburao Patankar and Indu-tai Patankar. She stayed with them in their hometown Kasegoan: a small village in the district of Sangli. She took her last breath at the same place. She pioneered the Shramik Mukti Dal. Gail worked hand in hand with Bharat Patankar for all progressive, leftist, Ambedkarite, Satyasodhak and Dalit–Bahujan movements. They both accepted Buddhism because she admired the freedom to question which it gave her.

I remember one incident, which is engraved in my mind, and will remain so. I had registered for my PhD on the subject of Dalit theology and the issue of conversion under her guidance at Savitribai Phule University Pune. Gail celebrated this achievement with my mother Kamal Jadhav and me with a dinner party. She immediately gave me a few books to read on the subject. I had two toddlers and an eight hour's job to juggle. So, she planned to buy a second-hand car so that she could visit me at my hometown which was 120 kms away from Pune. In context of recent times, the idea of a guide travelling for 3 hours to meet a student is a utopian idea. However, the University later cancelled my registration under the pretext of her shifting away to Delhi. This broke our hearts, and she came to visit me at Ahmednagar from Kasegaon with Prachi, her daughter. But we both never uttered a word about my PhD being cancelled. It was a time of silent grieving. We went for an outing at Dongargan. This was Gail for me...child-like and tender hearted. A sensitive human, with a strong dedication and the strength of a rock to shake the world.

She was neither Swedish, nor American. She belonged to those who were toiling.

Treading under her feet soils of each colour
Tattooing it on her heart and soul
And one with those who wept
She stood.

Gail Omvedt mainly known for her extensive research work on Buddha, Mahatma Phule, Ambedkar and Marx, brought to surface new interpretations of Sant Literature and Warkari Tradition of Maharashtra. She travelled widely for her research and participated in the Women's and Adivasi movements.

The last time I met Gail was when she visited Ahmednagar on her way to Aurangabad for a seminar at Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. We all had lunch together with Dr. Patankar and my family. I had brought some *gulab jamuns* for her (a sweet dessert soaked in sugar syrup). Dr. Bharat Patankar looked at her with great admiration as she ate many of them in one go. He teasingly asked, "How many did you eat?" She answered, "I don't know... but there are a few left for you". We all laughed. This was her last sweet visit to my place. Her health deteriorated after this visit. During the Covid pandemic her health worsened due to lack of movement in the lockdown. On 25th of August 2021, Gail passed away leaving behind an interpretation of her vision of Begampura.



Biographies 5.4

Gail Omvedt: Feisty Theoretician, Spirited Activist, and Staunch Anti-Caste Crusader

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Gail Omvedt (1949–2021) has been widely regarded as the voice of voiceless and the marginalised, celebrated for her vociferous and pro-subaltern mode of academic activism. She was born in Minneapolis, USA and lived her life in Kasegav, Sangli (Maharashtra). Omvedt came to India in 1971 for her doctoral research on social movements and Jyotiba Phule. Studying at Carleton College, Minnesota, under the mentorship of Eleanor Zelliot, who was among the earliest Western academics to study the marginalized sections of Indian society, Gail read Buddha, Ambedkar, Phule, Iyothee Thass, and Ravidas with great enthusiasm. She became an Indian citizen in 1983, and her precise and rigorous reconstruction and deconstruction of anti-caste, environmental, peasant and feminist movements have mapped the embedded exploitation of socio-feudal structures of capitalist and Brahmanical hegemony. The integrative perspective of her writings and ideas, juxtaposed to praxis informed by Marxism, Buddhism, Ambedkar-ism, and feminism made her a champion of neo-subaltern studies in India. While going through her research informed by ground-truth, every page reverberates with a story of voiceless subjects and traduced communities. Her spirit of activism resulting from the organic subjective understanding she developed, saw her cataloguing analytical stories about the neglect and exploitation of tribals, Dalits and other deprived communities. While discussing her penchant for organic sociology, one cannot therefore delink Omvedt from the category of scholarly activism since her scholarly writings were deeply connected with grassroots activism.

Gail was among those hardcore sociologists who sought to provide answers to problems confronting Dalits, women, and farmers within Brahminical patriarchy. In her *Seeking Begumpura* (2008) she championed the anti-caste discourse of Ravidas that was juxtaposed to the Ram Rajya model, and instead advocated a casteless and classless society. Omvedt imagined an inclusive India that was regulated and directed by social democracy and not political democracy. She strongly condemned visions of India predicated on religious texts, and claiming that "Indian social formation was actually based on a caste-feudal mode of production" (Omvedt 1982: 10-11). She imagined a new India led by intellectuals and leaders from subaltern backgrounds. It was this revolution that would provide the nation with a chance of being led through a system of distributive

justice (Omvedt 1991: 15-27). Omvedt questioned the notion Gandhi's non-violence. Deconstructing his ideas, she made a strong distinction between political nonviolence from social nonviolence. According to Omvedt, Gandhi used non-violence to attain political revolution and quench political aspirations. This failed to achieve a social revolution towards a casteless India. If Gandhian nonviolence had inaugurated social revolution, the very idea of India would be different – an idea wherein Brahmins and non-Brahmins would eat together, and where all religions would have equal space. Omvedt questioned the foundation of the Indian National Congress and criticized it as a party headed by the bourgeois and upper castes, rather than formed from below (Omvedt 1973: 2-9). Omvedt spread her revolutionary message by participating in anti-caste movements, pro-women, pro-peasant, and anti-development movements that instead, highlighted the displacement of the poor. Unlike armchair sociologists, Omvedt imbibed a strong subaltern studies approach that upheld community unity and dignity, to respond to the problems of caste discrimination, class oppression, and the subjection of women. Rebuffing the orientalist, nationalist, and Hindutva reimagination of India, Omvedt collected the imaginations from subaltern, anti-caste crusaders, right from the Bhakti philosophers of Maharashtra to modernist movements of consciousness. This was in striking contrast to Gandhi's village utopia of Ram Rajya, Nehru's Hindutva-laced Brahminical socialism, and Savarkar's territorialist Hindu Rashtra (Omvedt 2008: 239).

Consolidating her position on women, Omvedt discusses the socio-cultural genealogy of a system that produced Dalit women as lower to Brahmin and other, upper-caste privileged women. Women in general, and Dalit women in particular had to succumb to their subordination dictated by the forces of caste, nascent capitalism, and patriarchy. Omvedt opposed the socio-cultural models that pushed women to the peripheries and her aim to uncover the complexities surrounding women's impediments criticized the instrumentalization of downtrodden and oppressed women within social movements. While the dominant castes and rich controlled these movements, downtrodden women remained oppressed, sexually subordinated, and culturally subjugated. She termed this complex intersectional subjugation 'social patriarchy', that had Dalit, peasant women exposed to the punitive ethics that shielded upper caste women. While discussing the internal democracy of nationalist movements, Omvedt commented on the magnitude of benefit accrued to the upper castes, compared to women from the lower caste communities. According to her, only women who controlled capital and were privileged benefitted, while the underprivileged continued to suffer (Omvedt 1998: 83-105). Omvedt's organic discussions with women's movements, fellow feminists, trade unionists, women labourers, domestic workers, students, and others, was compiled in the form of her provocative publication, *We shall Smash this Prison: Indian Women in Struggle*.

Omvedt was a strong environmentalist – something evident from all her writings and field accounts. In the 1980s, Omvedt and her mother-in-law co-founded the *Shramik Mukti Dal*, a labour movement that focused mainly on drought-related issues, and the use of water, contextualized within a critique of the development discourse, and hydropower projects that were located in socio-ecologically, sensitive regions. She wrote a scathing

letter on the same issue (Omvedt 2011: 373-394) to Arundhati Roy, in which she lamented the missing link between grassroots movements like the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* started by Medha Patkar. In the letter, Omvedt raises the question of leadership, and of missing leaders from the Adivasi communities in social and feminist movements spearheaded by Roy and Patkar. This act of making invisible along with appropriation that Omvedt flagged off, defined her perfectly in the role of a social theoretician and an activist. In her writings on Indian women, Omvedt powerfully argued that women in Indian society were vulnerable because of their regulation through caste, class, and religion. To understand the complexities of women's position in India, one had to therefore understand the barricades of caste that obstructed women with the least of opportunities. At a conference organized by the Indian Sociological Association in Mysuru, in the year 2018, Omvedt pointed to the 'relative advantages' of the globalised world, wherein marginalised sections of society could at least access mechanised ways of capital accumulation. Explaining this, she writes: 'Being 'anti-globalisation' has become the current standard of political correctness. Those upholding the slogan are reluctant to give it up. When it is argued that 'globalisation' as such has simply a technological social meaning, is inevitable, and has certain good aspects (all of which the anti-globalisers find hard to deny), they retreat to 'opposing imperialist globalisation', or (which is again a different thing), 'opposing neoliberal globalisation' (Omvedt 2005: 4881-85). Omvedt in her book *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* drew parallels between Ambedkar and Marxism, and the early shape of anti-caste movements in India that became later conflated with labour movements. She referred to Ambedkar as 'enlightened', as the purveyor of social reconstruction modelled on the exhortations of the French Revolution, 'liberty, equality, fraternity' that in his case was combined with Buddhism. Whenever she organized a campaign, Ambedkar, Marx, Phule, and the Buddha were always present. When the day comes, when India will rediscover the contributions of Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule – a time when Dalits will reassert their identity, Gail Omvedt's contribution in bringing their stories, theories, emotions, and experiences to academia that also united every Dalit household will be remembered.

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Biographies 5.5

Gail Omvedt: Thinking Revolution and Seeking Utopia

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In one of the last of her long essays (2014), Gail Omvedt (along with Bharat Patankar) called for the need to rethink philosophy, as such, so that it ceases to be a description of a world that must be freed from this or that oppressive aspect of existence, and instead becomes the condition for a radically new world, a utopia that it thinks into being. Unsurprisingly, the article ended with a quote from Marx's *Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself".¹

Omvedt laid great store by the human capacity for reason and renewal, of both life and thought, and held that while our renewed understanding of desirable values and our living the valued life were profoundly historical, the desire to make history was trans-epochal and social, in that we have always attempted to do this, and always in relation to each other, and to the natural world. To her, this enduring desire to grasp the world anew, again, and again, had to do with our collective will to knowledge. It is not accidental that Omvedt's essay referenced Mahatma Jotirao Phule in this context: "Without knowledge, wisdom was lost; without wisdom morals were lost; without morals development was lost; without development wealth was lost; without wealth shudras are ruined; all these disasters are due to lack of knowledge".²

Omvedt's life might thus be read as one led in pursuit of valuable and worthy knowledge that would help build local communities, committed to fraternity and equality.

From 2000-2003, Omvedt wrote a regular column in the Chennai-based South Indian daily, *The Hindu*, in which she addressed contemporary concerns: debates around the reservation of seats for women in the legislature; the extension of positive discrimination measures for the so-called lower castes and Dalits to the corporate sector; the relationship between race and caste, which had come to be extensively discussed in the wake of the UN sponsored World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2001), and the limits to Indian secularism, which

¹ This featured in her blog: <https://seekingbegumpura.wordpress.com/2014/01/01/philosophies-and-respect-self-respect-freedom-recognition-and-liberation/>; accessed 31/10/2021

² Ibid.

had become all too apparent, with the advent of the Hindu Right to power. She also invited debates on the economic options that would intersect with and make possible radical political change in neo-liberal India – thoughtful welfarism, creative ways of reckoning with a voracious capitalism, and a critical and robust engagement with information and biotechnologies. In all this, she pointed to the importance of leavening political and economic action with philosophical and moral reasoning, which drew from India's great dissenting traditions of thought, and looked to both annihilate and remake the social order.

These essays of the new millennium rehearsed themes that had been dear to Omvedt for over three decades. One of the very first essays that she wrote for an international academic readership featured in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (BCAS) and addressed what she referred to as Gandhi's "pacification of the Indian revolution" and it flagged what would become her enduring concerns (Omvedt 1973: 2-9). Her analysis focused on three aspects of Gandhi's politics: his bringing the masses into the nationalist struggle; non-violence, and his purported success in aligning the political and social revolutions. Arguing that Gandhi did not quite rouse the masses, for they were already roused, she called attention to the political trajectories that had achieved this rousing: the Non-brahmin movements in western and southern India had radicalized a section of society and their representatives had begun to take on the caste order, and its Brahmin apologists. Peasant and tribal struggles across the subcontinent had brought to the fore a restive rural population, and from the 1920s, urban workers were mobilized under a communist leadership.

Gandhi had wagered non-violent campaigns calculated to tone down the radical impetus there was in such struggles – a measure that was read for what it was by astute and passionate political actors, and here Omvedt pointed to how the great peasant and Non-Brahman leader Nana Patil in Maharashtra, and Babasaheb Ambedkar had countered Gandhian nationalism as well as his 'resolution' of the caste and untouchable questions.

Her subsequent writings for the *BCAS* – and other international journals, such as *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* and feminist zines, such as *Off our Backs* and *Big Mama* – addressed a range of issues: changes in India's agrarian economy, environmental struggles, and the women's question. In almost all of these, Omvedt consistently invoked anti-caste radical thought and thinkers. She was well acquainted with these thought worlds. Her doctoral work was on Jotirao Phule and the organization he founded, the Satyashodhak Samaj (the Truth-seekers society) (Omvedt 2011). She was equally familiar with contemporary expressions of this tradition, which she encountered in rural Maharashtra, in the political work of peasant activists, including Dalit agricultural labourers. In addition, she had come to read Ambedkar's writings closely, and engaged contemporary Ambedkarite thinkers in sustained dialogue.

Convinced that anti-caste dissent, as she had come to know it, exemplified a living tradition of protest, she went on to elaborate its pragmatic as well as utopian aspects,

drawing her observations from localized movements that sought to build a sustainable agrarian economy, committed to equality and justice (Omvedt 1995: 43-59).

Like many of her generation, Omvedt was concerned about intellectual labour and how one might make it worthy and relevant. Not only socialists, who had always been invested in relating theory and practice, but feminists too were concerned with knowledge and consciousness that would enable them to remake their lives and the world. In an essay on her research on women's movements in India, Omvedt acknowledged the importance of this endeavour (Omvedt 1979: 373-393). Politics, she noted, required the interjection of the conscious element. Organisers, whether from the middle or working classes, necessarily had to be proto social scientists, who attended to the field, and 'read' it in ways that would make for effective action. Meanwhile, she held that social scientists ought to rethink the basis of their labour as well.

Arguing that historically academic social sciences had been of service to elites and focused on "themes of values and creation of order that give credence to corporate liberal ideologies", she noted that the problem had as much to do with knowledge flows, as it had to, with the political proclivities of researchers: "... the very flow of information is generally from the bottom to the top, very few of the technical skills of social scientists are put at the disposal of radical organizers. The concern to reverse and counteract this process that has been growing up in the last decade is one of the most hopeful trends in the social sciences..." (Ibid.: 392).

Omvedt's "hope" had to do with two intertwined developments: the reflexive turn in the social sciences, occasioned, among other things, by the emergence of feminist scholarship and which she followed diligently, especially with regard to women's relationship to production, the family, and the environment. It seemed to her that feminist consciousness in India, at least in the 1970s, had come about on account of a fruitful encounter between urban women, familiar with this emergent discourse and rural female organisers and actors. This had made for a rich and mutual exchange of views and a shared understanding that emerged in dialogue and doing.

More specifically, she was aware of and endorsed the political turn in knowledge-making that was signalled by the setting up of the Committee of Concerned Asian scholars – *BCAS* was published by this group, and she not only wrote regularly for it, but helped advance its critical agenda. A recent study of this Committee points to the significant role that it played during an important historical conjuncture, when Asia was convulsed by revolutionary movements, which invited American reprisal (Lanza 2016: 134-55). The Committee set itself against "an Asian policy committed to ensuring American domination of much of Asia" and its members declared that they desired "to develop a humane and knowledgeable understanding of Asian societies and their efforts to maintain cultural integrity and to confront such problems as poverty, oppression, and imperialism. We realize that to be students of other peoples, we must first understand our relations to them" (Ibid.: 139).

While the committee was concerned substantively with American intervention in Vietnam and with their country's attitude towards China, the *BCAS* published on a range of Asian concerns. It was evident that writers not only sought to write from a different perspective, but also looked to discern in Asian developments "inspiration and application to general human problems, to problems Americans as well as citizens of the Third World face in the here and now" (Ibid.: 138). Asian people, it was made clear, were not merely objects of knowledge, but subjects of their own politics, and the social scientist's task was to engage with this subjectivity.

Omvedt stepped in to write about India, and brought to debates about the region a startling openness and freshness of perspective. In a meeting of members that discussed the usefulness of a term such as "Asian socialism" she suggested that Indian affairs be viewed in relation to what had transpired in China: not only would a consideration of Indian problems help illuminate Chinese developments, but also point to what might yet unfold in India – a revolution that answered to its distinctive realities (Ibid.: 141).

As she made clear in her subsequent work, Indian realities were not to be judged in terms of what had become staple in social science thought, the so-called modernization theories, which were steeped in technocratic and culturalist assumptions. Rather the Indian present needed to be understood in its differentiated and granular detail, which, if conceptualized adequately, was likely to yield knowledge about the country's potential, or otherwise, for revolutionary transformation (Omvedt 1973: 261-276).

Her understanding of the social order in India was grounded in her recognition of the caste system as foundational and from this ground, she examined the impact of colonial and modern forms of capitalism in its many geographies. Taking her cues from present struggles across the country, which had disrupted the given-ness of caste and capital, she created a historical lineage for political radicalism, elaborating on cultures of utopian dissent which, through time, had held to critical account caste and the Brahmanical ideologies that sustained it. She insisted that along with socialism, these thought worlds ought to engage the attention of Indian revolutionaries.

Her account of the present were framed by conceptual arguments that she assembled from a range of sources. Her writings on the agrarian crisis in India and the struggles occasioned by it – she wrote through the decade of the 1970s and well into the 1990s – followed a trajectory which had been set in place by the terms of socialist debate as these existed in the 1970s and which centred on arguments to do with the mode of production that had come to be in modern India. While she added her own to these exchanges, Omvedt did more: she called attention to a slew of theoretical challenges that socialists ought to view as urgent. Thus, she drew out the contradictions that underwrote communist mobilization in rural India, and argued that the socialist notion of class had to be systematically rethought, in relationship to caste and gender on the one hand, and ethnicity and the state on the other. She noted that the sexual division of labour, which underwrote social – and caste - reproduction, not only made for oppressive familial and social relationships but also served capital. She drew on Rosa Luxemburg's dictum that

capital required for its sustenance, continuing processes of primitive accumulation and noted in this regard that women's unwaged work, the dispossession of Adivasis, that is, their rights over land, forest and water, and the highly exploitative conditions that structured peasant production, were all intricately related and together made for a unified structure of inequality (Omvedt 1986).

She was critical of the Indian left's equation of public control over resources with state ownership of the latter, and called for a rigorous critique of the Indian state. Pointing to the paucity of empirical studies to do with the caste and class constituents of state power in India, she noted that the state needed to be viewed, not only as an institution that the revolution would help remake, but also as a structure that had to be recomposed in the here and now. Anti-caste radicals who called for an adequate representation of the lower castes and Dalits at all levels of governance, she reminded her readers, had called for a democratic remaking of the state. Rather than dismiss their concerns as 'bourgeois democratic' it was important to draw on the rich mix of ideas that Phule, Periyar and Ambdekar had brought to their understanding of governance and rule, and, on that basis, rethink the relationship between caste and class and democracy and socialism (Omvedt 2000).

As for feminist concerns, she brought her formidable knowledge of arguments within Anglo-American feminism to bear on events and experiences that she was witness to in India - sexual unfreedom, the tyrannical hold of kin and familial networks on women's lives, every day and casual misogyny and public violence against women. Even as she called attention to what urban Indian feminists had achieved by way of enhancing our understanding of sexuality and violence, in the context of the family, and more generally, intimate relations, she also noted what they had failed to do: develop organizational forms that would help extend and deepen their insights in and through collective mass struggles. In this context, she called attention to ruminations on gender, as these existed within the space of social movements in rural India. Such ideas, as had emerged in mass collective contexts, viewed women's lives within Indian histories as well as the Indian present, and focused on their role as providers and labourers.

That is, women were not viewed only in terms of their familial and kinship locations, and while this meant that sexual tensions and violence as these unfolded in domestic spaces, were not critically examined, public patriarchy was, especially the changing forms of violence that peasant and labouring women had to endure, in their localized contexts, as well as at the hands of a hostile state. Calling for a dialogue between feminists concerned with sexuality and violence, and those who focused on public expressions of patriarchal authority, Omvedt pointed to what either segment had failed to do: understand and theorise the mediating power of caste, as it impinged on women's lives, at home and in the world (Omvedt 1990).

In her own work, Omvedt sought to theorise caste in two ways: she deployed it as a category of analysis, even as she viewed it as anchoring the social totality. Caste was what helped one make sense of the worlds of production and reproduction in their inter-

relatedness, and equally it was a Brahmanical notion that stood to be critically examined, in terms of the intellectual arguments that legitimized it – these are themes that run through the entire gamut of her work, and she sought to summarise them in an impressive volume, which took a historical lens to caste (Omvedt 2012).

Her reflections on the subject had acquired a certain urgency in the wake of the Mandal-Masjid conjuncture. Convinced that anti-caste thought was the ground on which any opposition to Hindu nationalism and its constitutive casteism could be built, she went on to produce radical political pedagogy that would help disseminate knowledge of this thought world (Omvedt 1994).

Veering between a politics that sought to “smash this prison”, of patriarchy, caste and capitalism, and an ethics that sought that utopia of no suffering and no taxes, Begumpura, Gail Omvedt sought to reinvent the idea of revolution, pointing as she did to multiple temporalities that had to be attended to, and the diverse imaginative tasks that are required of revolutionaries.³ She accepted no certainties, and instead trusted to the possibilities that lie immanent in radical impermanence.

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Book Presentations 6.1

Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

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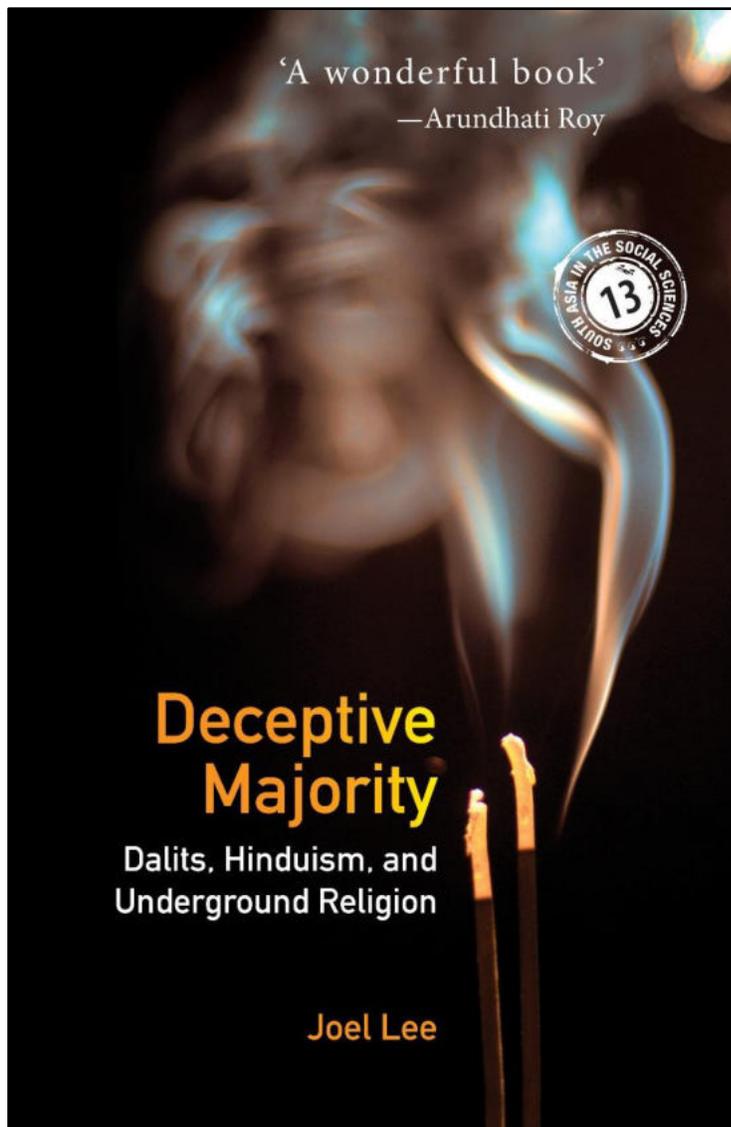


Figure 6.1.1 Jacket, *Deceptive Majority*, by Lee

How did it come to be common sense that the vast swath of the population of South Asia once known as 'untouchable' are and always have been Hindu?

Grounded in detailed archival and ethnographic research, *Deceptive Majority* unearths evidence that well before the emergence of twentieth century movements for Dalit liberation, the subset of 'untouchable' castes engaged in sanitation labour in colonial north India conceived of themselves as constituting a religious community (*qaum*) separate from both Hindus and Muslims—a community with its own shrines, rites, legends, and liturgical songs, centred on an antinomian prophet named Lal Beg. The book tracks the career of this tradition alongside a century of efforts to encompass it within the Hindu body politic—a majoritarian project anchored in colonial taxonomies of religion and modes of governance, but advanced in complex, distinct, yet convergent ways by Hindu nationalists in the mould of Swami Shradhanand

and the Congress party guided by Mohandas Gandhi. Following Shradhanand, the self-professed missionaries of the Arya Samaj pursued the Hinduization of the sanitation labour castes by local campaigns of persuasion, confronting, in the process, their own embodied *ghrina*—a socialized disgust at contact with Dalits. Quite different, though equally decisive in ultimately bringing about the discursive confinement of Dalits within Hinduism were the representational practices of Gandhi, his Harijan Sevak Sangh (“Servants of Untouchables Society”), and the Congress, which brought into alignment the enumerative imagination of the modern state with Brahminical social ontology.

An account of contemporary religious life in the north Indian city of Lucknow illuminates both the embrace and the contestation of the Hinduization urged on Dalits by Hindu nationalists and the postcolonial state. Examining the practices by which signs of the community’s Hindu affiliation are amplified and tied to a new ethic of publicity whereas signs of older, Islamicate affinities are obscured and rendered disavowable, the book suggests that attention to regions of communicative practice ordinarily neglected in social analysis may disclose a mode of Dalit politics as widespread as it is unrecognized. A genealogy of the religious politics of the present and an examination of the ethics and semiotics of secrecy, *Deceptive Majority* reveals the cunning both of the architects of Hindu majoritarianism and of those who quietly undermine it.



Book Presentations 6.2

Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India (Oxford University Press, 2021)

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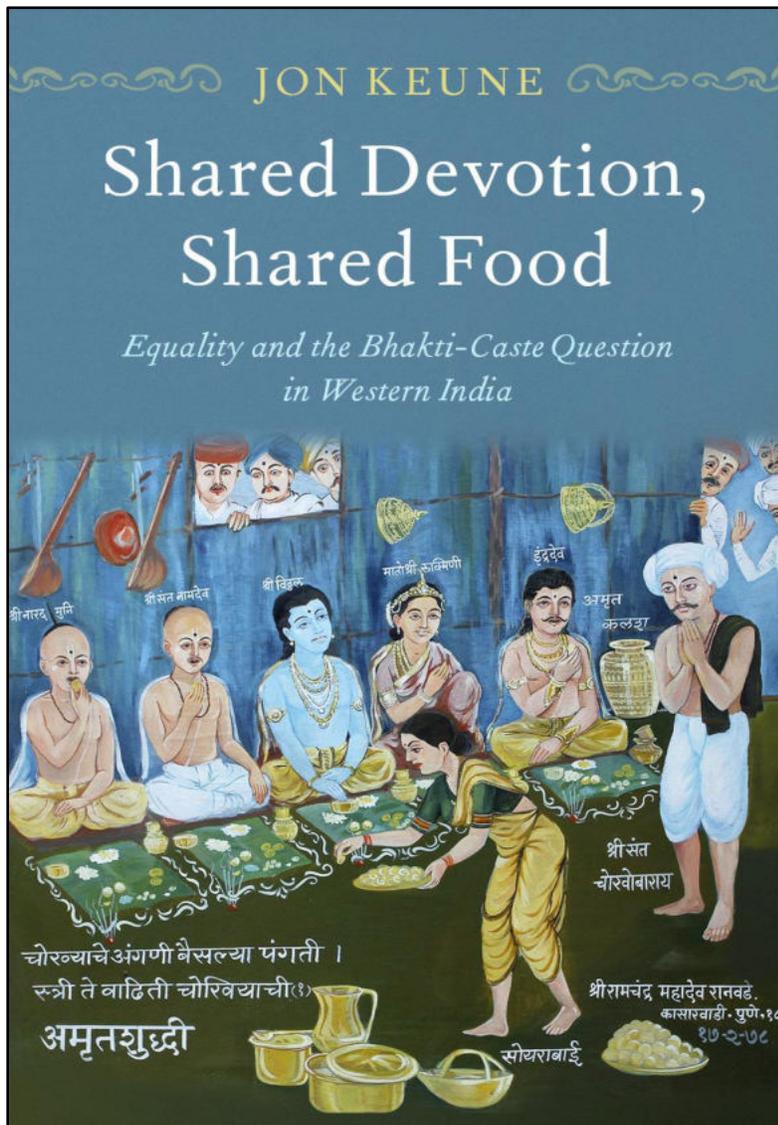


Figure 6.2.1 Jacket, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food*, by Keune

The relationship between religion and social equality is widely debated around the world. Some people condemn social hierarchies and inequalities as grounded in religious doctrines, practices, and traditions. Others draw on some of those same things to mobilize groups toward activism and self-assertion. Scholars often refer to 'social equality' to explain what occurred in the past, using it as a narrative reference point by seeking out historical ideas and practices that resemble seeds of equality that had yet to grow. Perspectives on religion and social equality are diverse, confusing, and contentious.

Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India investigates a vivid example of this by considering a deceptively simple question: when Hindu devotional or bhakti traditions welcomed people who were typically

marginalized—women, lower castes, and Dalits—was this an early modern example of promoting social equality? As natural and logical as this way of putting it may seem now, it is a peculiarly modern formulation of the bhakti-caste question. The great Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar had this formulation in mind when he concluded that bhakti saints promoted spiritual equality, but this remained only an abstract affair and did not transform the social world. *Shared Devotion, Shared Food* takes Ambedkar's judgment seriously but also situates it within the history of ideas and social practice, in which the bhakti-caste question is more complex. Diving deeply into Marathi sources between 1700 and the present, this book reveals how the major bhakti tradition in west-central India worked out the relationship between bhakti and caste on its own terms.

Food and eating together were central. As stories about saints and food changed while moving across manuscripts, theatrical plays, and films, the bhakti-caste relationship went from being a strategically ambiguous riddle to a question that expected—and received—answers. *Shared Devotion, Shared Food* demonstrates the value of “critical commensality” as a scholarly approach to understanding how people carefully negotiate their ethical ideals with social practices. Food's capacity to symbolize many things made it an ideal site for debating bhakti's implications about caste differences. In the Varkari tradition, strategically deployed ambiguity, and resonance of stories across media developed an ideology of inclusive difference—not social equality in the modern sense but an alternative holistic view of society.

The book has two parts. The first part (Chapters 1-3) lays out the historical and conceptual components that came together so that it became possible to frame the bhakti-caste question in terms of social equality. After defamiliarizing readers with this common but peculiarly modern way of asking the bhakti-caste question, the second part (Chapters 4-7) focuses on stories about transgressive commensality, to reveal how one influential bhakti tradition handled the question through diverse Hindu terms then and as the modern language of equality became central in Marathi discourse.

Chapter One investigates the modern reliance on the idea of social equality as a reference point and analytical term for studying historical religious traditions. Social historians' Marxian interest in non-elite people carried with it assumptions about the role of religion. Western social and political discourse around the rise of nation-states in the 18th and 19th centuries made social equality an ideal, even as modern democracies have often failed to bring it about. This prompts a reconsideration of the apparent place of equality in historical religions. Chapter Two shows how the diversity of regional bhakti traditions complicates theorizing about bhakti and caste. This consideration situates the book's perspective in Marathi-speaking western India, where issues of caste and untouchability featured prominently in the region's traditions, and where some of India's most vocal anti-caste movements arose. Chapter Three traces how language of equality spread in 19th- and 20th-century publications about Varkari literature, written by liberal reformers, nationalists, rationalists, subaltern critics, and literary historians. Food featured prominently in these writings and in pivotal events in many of the authors' lives. Having

described the formation of modern discourse around bhakti and equality, the chapter recovers the earlier devotional and nondualist Marathi terminology that modern equality language displaced.

Chapter Four examines how food and practices of sharing it are often excellent sites for observing social tensions and understanding the local terms in which they are understood—something that “critical commensality” can anticipate and reveal. R. S. Khare’s discussion of gastro-semantics and food’s semantic density are especially illuminating of South Asian cases, such as in references to food in Hindu literature throughout history and in bhakti hagiographies, where *ucchishta* or leftover food conveys many meanings. Chapter Five zooms in on two food stories whose retellings changed across various media and the intellectual landscapes of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. The brahman saint Eknath and Dalits are at the centre of both stories, in which Eknath’s generosity upset orthodox brahmans, and miraculous events vindicate Eknath’s actions without refuting caste. Chapter Five traces how these stories moved and changed through Marathi texts between 1700 and 1800, as hagiographers strategically employed ambiguity to avoid answering the bhakti-caste question. Chapter Six follows the stories as they appear in 20th-century Marathi plays and films in which they adjusted to new narratological demands, adopted the increasingly standard language of equality, and reflected the political currents of the 20th century, especially non-brahman movements. Playwrights and film producers became fascinated with the story about Eknath eating at a Dalit couple’s home, which to modern eyes appeared increasingly like an act of social protest and reform. Chapter Seven reflects on studying bhakti now in the shadow of Ambedkar, in terms of historiographical practices and ramifications for living traditions. Hagiographers’ strategic ambiguity and the resonance chamber of stories echoing as they were regularly performed effectively led to an ideology of inclusive difference, which food’s semantic density also facilitated well. In modern times, traditional strategic ambiguity and inclusive ideology fared poorly against the new standard of social equality. What this means for bhakti traditions going forward is yet to be determined. Commensality may once again play a vital role in this, even if only on an everyday, micro-political level.



Biographies 6.3

The Owl Delivered the Good News all Night Long: Folktales, legends, and Modern Lore of India (Aleph Book Company – Rupa Publications, 2021)

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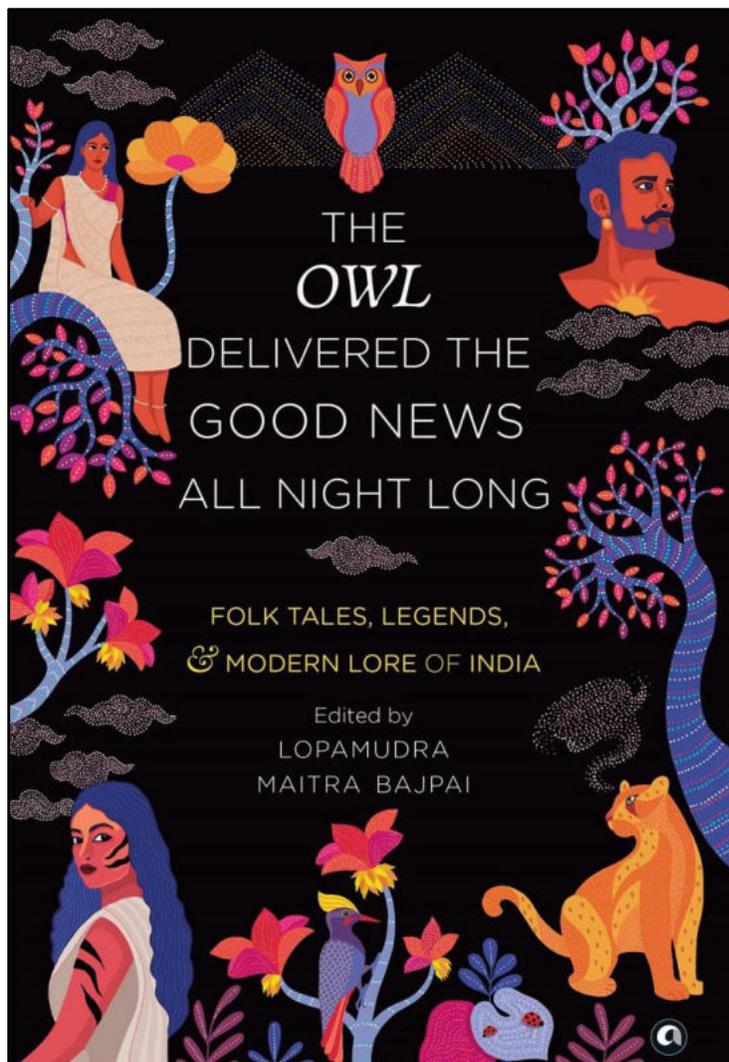


Figure 6.3.1 Jacket, *The Owl Delivered the Good News all Night Long*, Maitra Bajpai

More than three years in the making, this book is an omnibus of sorts, attempting to chart folktales and modern lore from the twenty-eight states and eight union territories of India, differentiated on the basis of linguistic identity. Consisting of a hundred and eight stories, including an introduction that attempts to reassess the present genres of Indian folklore, this edited book – a humongous task, portrays heterogeneity as a leitmotif. While the idea of regional-linguistic representation through a small number of folk stories from each linguistic zone may seem limited at first, one must, after all be philosophical, when dealing with a culture expanse as wide and historically complex as India. The book was also, unfortunately, subject to word limitation. Remaining mindful of such limitations already in place, three stories were chosen from every vernacular identity, covering the states and union territories of India, aided in this decision-

making task by the last Census report of the Government of India in 2011.

The stories in the book are alphabetically arranged, and organized according to states and union territories. The genre spans oral tradition and also includes modern digital media. The first story from each category is drawn from the region's official language, while the second story belongs to a different linguistic panel from the same state – either a language most spoken, or from a lesser-known, endangered dialect. The third story is not specific to any linguistic representation but is part of a collection that is traditional – historical to postcolonial, contemporary history of an India after Independence. These include post-partition narratives, as well as stories of philanthropy from various professional and ideological sectors like the stories told by artisans of the handicrafts sector, stories told by educationists, stories from within the women's movements, and local social movements against addiction or alcoholism, and stories of religious pluralism, to name a few categories. The collection thus, covers fifty-seven languages and dialects and include personal and community retellings. The book has over sixty authors and translators from across South Asia (including Sri Lanka), and the diversity of the stories creates its own independent language of communication, as myriad as their re-tellers, narrators, and translators from varied backgrounds – homemakers, writers and poets, agriculturists and farmers, environmental activists and conservationists, school teachers, women's rights activists, archaeologists, historians, workers from non-governmental organisations, doctors and other medical practitioners, handicrafts specialists, retired civil servants and government officials.

Two of the most salient features of this enterprise includes the reassessment of existing folklore genres, and the promotion of lesser-known languages, dialects, and non-script languages, that are going into oblivion due to the decline of their spoken form, or the declining demographical profile of their speakers. The second aspect is the inclusion of several personal recounting of stories that are specific to families. This is an interesting and important feature from the perspective of oral history that is otherwise limited to a specific locality or isolated region. Many times, such retellings highlight forgotten aspects of the same lore from a family or from a village that reconnect re-tellers and listeners to past events. While these aspects reconnoitre diversity and heterogeneity, they also unite communities and individuals with a larger history of geographical, linguistic, and geopolitical identity. As far as highlighting the need to reassess Indian folklore is concerned, this is best encapsulated through the quote: "an attempt to look at folklore, fables, mythologies and legends from an updated frame-of-reference. This is an imperative necessity in present times, keeping in mind the layers of changes within texts and discourses within stories, which are also representations of socio-economic, cultural, political and religious perspectives across a wide cross-section (p. xiv)."

It must be said that the range of stories, personally collected by the editor over the last three years have been divided across nine genres in the book that, quite uniquely, focus on emotions: stories of friendship, and lost love; stories of wit and humour, stories about rumours, women-centric stories, stories of righteousness and courage, creation stories,

ghost stories and urban legends, and stories about nature along with melioristic legends from modern times, all forming a central part. The reference and bibliography section is equally important, as it not only provides significant information about the stories, but also provides historical information about specific publications – many of them from different local, and regional publishing houses that otherwise remain outside the ambit of the mainstream. This book is suitable for the lay reader from around the globe, as much as it is a resource for scholars of Indian and South Asian history, culture studies, and communication, who are interested in intangible cultural heritage, and the oral history of India. Hopefully, our readers will discover several new perspectives, approaches, and contexts through the reading of such narratives.