

## *Role of Deities in Symbolizing Conflicts of Dispersing Human Groups*

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### *Introduction*

India abounds in local deities which are specific either to a given village or sets of villages or to a specific endogamous group restricted to a relatively limited geographical area, or both. One often finds associated with such deities a rich body of folklore which can illuminate the history of human groups which worship these deities. Such folklore can be particularly fascinating when it appears to have its origin in conflicts of interests amongst the different human groups. Such conflicts are apt to be particularly acute when a dispersing group comes in contact with one or more groups already settled in an area. Folktales of conflicts amongst deities which appear to symbolize such conflicts should, therefore, tell us something of the course of dispersal and settlement of various human groups in any locality.

The two authors came across interesting examples of this phenomenon when working on two different projects in two areas of the state of Maharashtra. One of us, an ecologist, was looking at the religious beliefs associated with the conservation of virgin forests as sacred groves, and the other, an anthropologist, at a particular group of nomads known as Nandiwallas (Gadgil and Vartak 1976; Malhotra 1974). The sacred groves were being investigated in highly mountainous terrain of the Western Ghats, an area of high rainfall and heavy

forests, while the Nandiwallas were encountered on the flat terrain of the dry plateau of the Deccan. The myths that we came across in the two cases related to quite different historical periods. Nevertheless, we noticed in both the situations interesting parallels which clearly have wider implications. The present contribution will, therefore, attempt to explore how folklore of conflicts amongst deities may be related to conflicts amongst human groups, particularly during their dispersal.

### *Case Studies*

#### *One*

Our first case study comes from the river valley of Mula, which has now been dammed to constitute the Panshet dam. This river valley lies in the Velhe taluka of Poona district right at the crestline of the Western Ghats, at the latitude of  $18^{\circ}25'N$  and  $73^{\circ}25' E$  (see fig. 1). The valley itself lies at an altitude of 700 meters, but on its either side are steep hills which rise to an altitude of over 1200 meters. The hill-tops have extensive flat plateaus characteristic of the Deccan Trap region. The locality receives an annual precipitation of around 3500

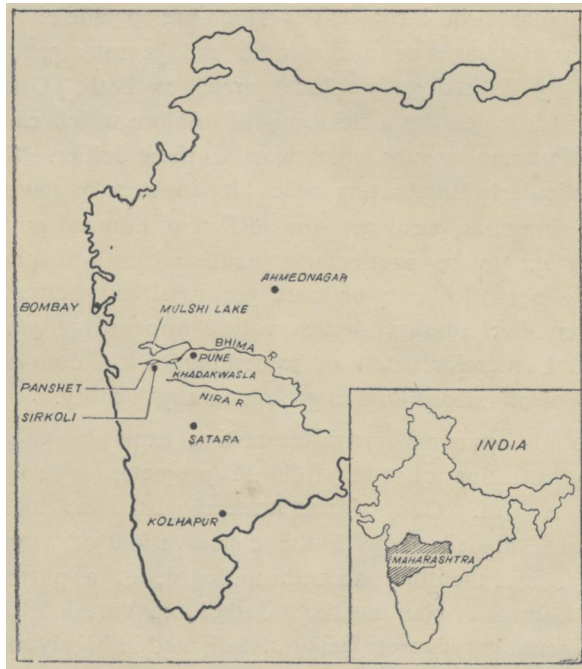
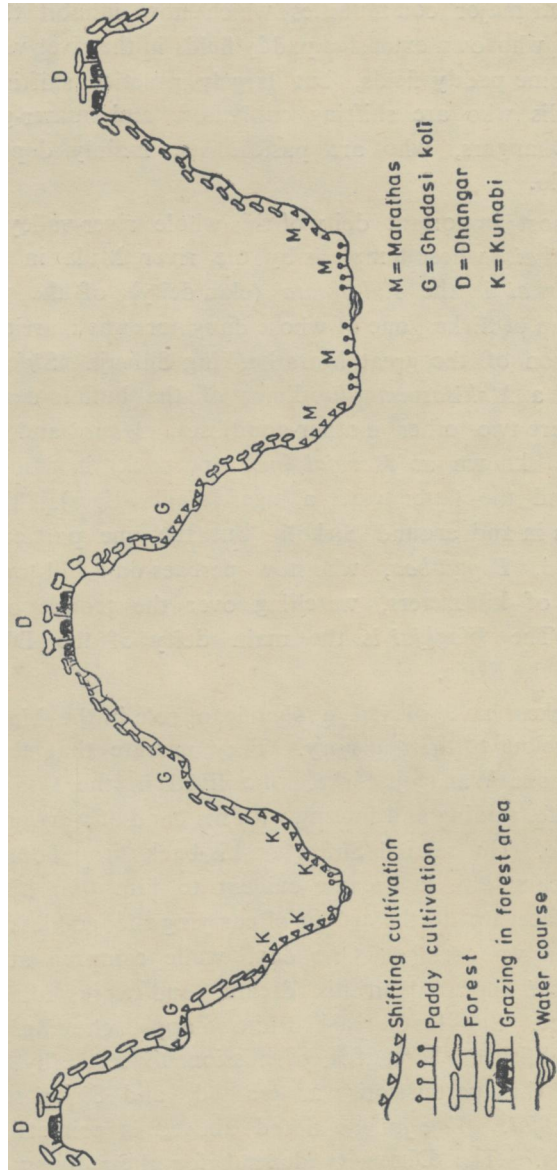


Figure 1



*Figure 2*

to 4000 mms, almost entirely concentrated during the four months of southwest monsoon from June to September. The natural climax vegetation is a semievergreen forest, dense and tall in the ravines and the valley, but rather stunted on the hill-top plateaus.

The four major communities which now inhabit this region are Marathas, who own extensive paddy fields in the river valleys; Kunbis who own some paddy fields, but largely practice shifting cultivation; Ghadsi Kolis who are shifting cultivators and hunter-gatherers, and Mahaske Dhangars, who are pastoralists, mainly dependent on the water-buffalo.

The most important deity of this whole river-valley is the mother-goddess *Sirkai*, whose temple is by the river Mula in the village of Sirkoli. *Sirkai* is the *Kul-devata* (clan deity) of the very powerful Maratha clan of Sirkes, one of whose daughters was married to Sambhaji the elder son of the great Maratha king Shivaji. *Sirkai herself* is in the form of a *Mahisasurmardini*-killer of the buffalo-demon. On her either side are two other mother-goddesses, *Manai* and *Waghji*. The former, also known as *Morajai* (*mor*=peacock) is associated with a peafowl, and the latter with a tiger (*wagh*=tiger). There are many other deities in and around Sirkoli, but the one particularly notable is a male god, *Bapuji-boa*, who now perches on a hill-top at a distance of a couple of kilometers, watching over the temple of *Sirkai* from up high. The *Waghjai* is the main deity of the Dhangars, and *Bapujiboa* of the Kolis.

The Sirkes have played a significant role in the Maratha history, and are conscious of their history. They narrate that the founder of their clan, one Wanagoji Sirke, who lived in the 14th century, led a nomadic life, raiding and looting with his band of warriors, throughout his life time. He carried *Sirkai* on his back throughout these travels. When he became old, it became evident to him that his descendents could not face up to the ardour of carrying the goddess on their back through their wanderings. One day, while camping at Sirkoli, the goddess *Sirkai* appeared in his dream, and expressed a wish to settle in that place. She further asked him to approach *Waghjai*, who was already established there, for permission to settle by her side. It appears that this permission was granted, and *Sirkai* settled by the side of *Waghjai*. *Waghjai*, as noted above, is primarily a deity of the Dhangars. The Dhangars depend for their living, entirely on their herds of buffaloes. Till very recently, these buffaloes were highly vulnerable to predation by tigers. Dhangars worshipped *Waghjai*-the tiger goddess-to protect their animals from this danger.

*Sirkai* was, thus, settled by the side of the deity of buffalo-keepers with the latter's permission. It is perhaps notable that *Sirkai* is in

the form of a *Mahishasur-mardini*-the slayer of the buffalo-demon. Interestingly enough, this buffalo-demon, as well as the goddess, are worshipped at the time of the *Sirkai* festival on *Chaitra pournima* day. The demon is worshipped a day before the main festival when the eyes of the goddess herself are tied with a cloth-band, presumably so as not to offend her with the worship of her mortal enemy. A male buffalo is sacrificed to this demon. The next day, the band is removed and the goddess herself is worshipped with the sacrifices of goats.

The real conflict that the *Sirkai* was involved in was with the male deity of the Kolis-the *Bapujiboa*. This deity-depicted by just a male head-fell in love with *Sirkai* and demanded her hand in marriage. *Sirkai* refused, and there ensued a great battle between the two. *Bapujiboa* was finally defeated in this battle, and ran away to the hill top from where he overlooks the *Sirkai* temple. But he comes down once a year and hunts the bank of the river opposite *Sirkai*'s temple on the day of her festival on *Chaitra purnima*. Nobody dares to visit that bank on this day, lest *Bapujiboa* devour him. In fact, we went to this bank to take some photographs on that day, and it was considered a miracle that we did not die.

### *Two*

Our second case study relates to the Nandiwallas, a non-pastoral nomadic group, of Western Maharashtra. These nomads number over 8000 persons and form two distinct sovereign groups—(1) Tirumal Nandiwallas, numbering around 3000, assemble every third year at the village Wadapuri in the Indapur Taluka of Poona district, (Malhotra, 1974) and (2) Fulmali Nandiwallas, numbering 5000 persons, return to about 38 base villages every year during monsoon months in the four districts, Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Bhir, and Nasik (Malhotra, et.al. 1976). Both these groups have clearly demarcated territory of operation.

The traditional occupation of the Nandiwallas was to move in a set of villages with their trained *nandi* (bull), the vehicle of lord *Shiva*. They are the communicants of greater tradition (Malhotra et al. 1978a). The Nandiwallas have migrated from Andhra Pradesh and are bilinguals; among themselves they speak in Telgu and with others in Marathi.

Although most of the Nandiwallas are true nomads, many are semi-nomadic, while a few, mostly among the Fulmali Nandiwallas, are settled (Malhotra, et al. 1978b). The process of sedenterization has, thus, begun and more and more of the Nandiwallas are getting settled.

The instance that follows actually relates to the conflict between the sedentary peasants and the nomadic people who wanted to get settled.

Ambu, a dominant person among one of the bands of the Fulmali Nandiwallas, along with a few other Nandiwallas, wanted to get settled at the village Chichondi in the Pathardi Taluka of Ahmadnagar district. The residents of the village, however, did not encourage them to get settled. The villagers' opposition was largely directed towards the worship and associated animal sacrifice. The deities, namely, *Chinnakka*, *Peddakka*, *Yellamma* etc, requiring animal sacrifice are all Andhra Pradesh based, the region of origin of the Nandiwallas. Ambu had in his possession these deities in the form of masks/ metal plates and had the powers of getting possessed by these deities.

In the meantime, Ambu, along with a few other Nandiwallas, visited Bombay and chanced upon to visit the well known temple of *Mumba-Devi*. Ambu worshipped the deity, offered *nivedya* and upon return to Chichondi installed the deity in the village. As against the Nandiwalla's Andhra based deities, *Mumba-Devi* required vegetarian offerings.

Soon after installing *Mumba-Devi*, Ambu started getting possessed by this deity along with other deities in his possession. *Mumba-Devi* would appear regularly in Ambu's dreams, sit on his chest and demand of him to get rid of all the deities requiring animal sacrifice. Ambu was also threatened by the deities requiring animal sacrifice. Unable to solve the situation by disowning any of the deities, Ambu became sick. At this juncture *Mumba-Devi* staged a 'war' upon the other deities and one by one drove away all the deities requiring animal sacrifice. Consequently, Ambu got rid of all the possessions pertaining to Andhra based deities.

After this Ambu stopped worshipping the Andhra based deities and would worship only *Mumba Devi*.

The place where *Mumba Devi* was installed has gradually taken a permanent form and besides Ambu all Tirumal Nandiwallas now worship this deity.

Ever since then a few families of the Nandiwallas got happily settled at Chichondi.

#### *Discussion*

The river-valley of Mula to day is occupied by four major communities: the Dhangars, the Kolis, the Marathas, and the Kunbis. As figure 2 shows, the Dhangar settlements are exclusively on the flat hill-top plateaus, at an altitude of 1000 to 12000 meters, away from all the villages. This is indeed a very harsh environment, subject to tremendous gales and punishing rains. Dhangars renowned for their courage, live in small settlements of five-ten families here, tend their buffaloes on grazing in the forest, and often fight off the tigers single-handed. They used to do very little shifting-cultivation, and little hunting-gathering. Their main sustenance was buttermilk made from the milk of buffaloes and millets or rice obtained by barter for the butter sold at weekly shandies (markets) in the various villages. Apart from these visits to weekly markets, the Dhangars are entirely self-contained and do not require the services of any other community-be it priests or medicine-men or barbers-for any function. They hardly interact with the villagers and remain mostly aloof.

Ecologically, this is not the optimum habitat, either for the buffaloes, or for the humans. The water buffalo of Dhangars is descended from the wild buffalo of Asia with which it readily inter-breeds whenever, the domestic and wild breeds come in contact as in Assam. The preferred habitat of the wild buffalo is the river valleys and swamps by the river. It loves to spend hours wallowing in water in such terrain. Its best food is the grass growing on the flood plains of the small rivers and streams. The domestic buffalo retains all these preference, and would certainly thrive much better in river-valleys than on the plateaus. For the humans too, the river valleys afford a much less harsh, and much richer habitat.

These ecological considerations, coupled with the fact that *Waghjai*, the deity of Dhangars resides in the river valley, suggest that this may have been the original habitat of Dhangars. Why else would they establish their deity several kilometers of a steep ascent away from

all their settlements on the hill tops? Sirkai is supposed to have arrived later than *Waghjai* and sought her permission to settle down. This request was no doubt backed by the armed might of the band of Wangoji Sirke who had lived as raiders before coming to settle down here. It then appears plausible that the Dhangars were earlier settled in the vicinity of their deity, *Waghjai* by the side of the river. But the river valley is also the best habitat for the cultivators, and the Dhangars may have been driven off the river valleys to the hill-tops by the Marathas who usurped their land.

The *Mahisasurmardini* form of the Maratha deity takes an added significance in view of this interpretation. The conflict of Marathas with the buffalo-keeping Dhangars may have been symbolised as the conflict of the goddess with the buffalo-demon. Perhaps when the Dhangars gave up and retired to the hill-tops, a compromise was reached. So, the buffalo-demon is worshipped along with the goddess who killed him, and *Waghjai* also continues in the same temple, and is also worshipped as a secondary deity by the Marathas. The Dhangars who came occasionally, worship the *Waghjai* as the primary deity.

The second community living in an almost as harsh an environment as that of Dhangars is that of Ghadasi Kolis. The Ghadasi Kolis stay to day on the higher hill-slopes at altitudes of 800-1000 meters in settlements of 25-30 families. They are hunter-gatherers-cum-shifting cultivators. It is their male god *Bapujiboa* who demanded the hand of the Maratha goddess *Sirkai* in marriage, was refused, and lost in the battle that ensued. Paralleling this conflict of deities, there is considerable historical folklore pertaining to the conflict between Kolis and Marathas. A fort at a place called Umbardi, in the neighbouring river valley of Mose was ruled over by a Koli king before the Maratha clans of Sirke and Pasalkar came on the scene. This Koli king is said to have controlled considerable territory in this area, including the river valleys. This Koli, it is narrated, demanded the daughter of one of the Pasalkars, who are another powerful Maratha clan in this region, for his son. The Marathas were mortally offended, but agreed to the match. They, then, hired a male to be dressed as a bride and sent him into the wedding pendol. When the Kolis were celebrating, the Pasalkars rushed out, burnt down the entire pendol with its Koli occupants, and then drove the Kolis out of their holdings in the river valley. It is then that the Kolis are supposed to have taken to



the higher reaches of the hills and settled in the inaccessible terrain. The Koli villages of Khanu and Chandar in this region are those most difficult of access from anywhere. The Kolis as well as the Marathas continue to narrate this historical incident.

Let us now examine the contents of second case study relating to the Fulmali Nandiwallas. The substance of the conflict between *Mumba-Devi* and Andhra based deities symbolises the conflict between sedentary and nomadic people. In other words, the conflict arose as soon as the nomadic Nandiwallas wanted to get settled.

The conflict can be analysed at two levels—(1) within the Nandiwalla community and (2) between Nandiwallas and the sedentary people.

The Nandiwallas justify continuation of nomadic way of life as it is the will of their deities. The Andhra based deities, according to them, would not allow them to get settled. Thus, it is imperative that if they wished to get settled they must get rid of these deities. Ambu, who possessed some of these deities, thus, had to get rid of them. This, he could not do himself and, therefore, he took recourse to a powerful deity of the sedentary people. The 'war' that ensued between *Mumba-Devi* and other deities resulted into the defeat of the latter deities. This victory of *Mumba-Devi* symbolises the victory of the norms and values of the sedentary people over the norms and values of the nomadic people. In other words, the nomads gave up some of their socio religious practice and recognized the supremacy of the sedentary people.

Consequent to the above instance, *Mumba-Devi* is now worshipped by all the Fulmali Nandiwallas and that before any new permanent settlement of the nomads would come up, the installation of *Mumba-Devi* at those settlement is a must.

These examples confirm the case put forth by Kosambi (1962) regarding religious conflicts as symbolic of social conflicts. It is an area of investigation very much worth pursuing further. India abounds in local deities to which much interesting folklore and historical traditions are attached. By a careful scrutiny of this wealth of information, we could arrive at a picture of how the various dispersing groups have interacted with each other and fallen into place.

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