

Sand in Our Hands: The Little-known Stories of Vasai-Palghar

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The word 'indigenous' originates in colonial references wherein the culture and literature of the colonizer was different from that of the native, and the literature of the latter came to be known as 'indigenous'. It is the significant 'Other'. Correspondingly, all literature in India as a colony of the British would have been considered 'indigenous'. In the post-colonized scenario, the word indicates literature in English as against regional language literatures. It also refers to the 'tribal' as contrary to 'urban' or 'mainstream', which has been immensely influenced by the literature of the colonizers. However, in India, as Dr. G. N. Devy in the introduction to *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature* states, "It is almost impossible to characterize all of India's tribals in a single ethnographic or historic framework. In the Indian context, the term 'tribal' is too layered to be a synonym for 'indigenous.'"

While most countries of the world have two types of literature, the 'tribal' and the 'mainstream', in India, there are broadly three types, viz., the 'tribal', 'rural' and 'mainstream' or 'metropolitan'. Dr. Devy, in his observation *on parampara* in *After Amnesia*, broadly divides it into the "*Marga* - the metropolitan or mainstream tradition, and *Desi* - regional and subcultural traditions"(18). He thus includes the literature of the villages - the *gramin* (14) - in the second group - the important link between the two extremes of 'tribal' and 'urban'. Many of the stories of these villages are intimately and intricately connected not only with the tribal but also mainstream literature of olden times. They are thus the bridge between the tribal and urban worlds. While a lot of attention and money is being given for tribal welfare and the preservation of its art and folklore, the art and oral literature of the villages has been largely ignored. This paper explores the 'village' connotation of the word 'indigenous' and attempts to

bring to light the oral literature of the people of an area in the shadow of the metropolis of Mumbai, viz., the Vasai-Palghar region.

The Vasai-Palghar belt adjacent to north-western Mumbai is a land rich not only in its farm produce but also in its local (to use Ramanujan's term) "tellings" (Richman 24) of stories from ancient India that are rooted here. This is the Dandakaranya-kshetra of the *Ramayana*, as maps of ancient India indicate. The western part of this land was Surparaka, from where Surpanaka seems to have come. There are stories of Adiravan and Mahiravan, her brothers, who were caretakers of this area that came under Ravan's empire. There are areas whose legends talk of the visits of Ram and Lakshman, of the camps of Krishna and the Pandavas. The ancient temples that dot this place have stories connected with those in the *Puranas*. Besides these, are the stories of how the prominent deities of the land came to be. This paper will move from the local to larger narratives.

Let us begin with the story of the famed Jeevadani temple in Virar and the local legend behind it. It is said to be one of the fifty-one shakti-sthals of the Indian subcontinent. Aeons ago, in the village at the foothills of this mountain, a cow would come to the land of a farmer, and graze from morning to sunset. One day, out of curiosity, the man followed the cow up the hill. At the top was a plateau, where the cow stopped. Suddenly, there appeared a radiant lady at the spot. Assuming her to be the owner of the cow, the farmer demanded that she pay him for feeding her cow for that long. The lady was on the verge of paying him, when the man told her he was an untouchable. At that, the lady disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared; the cow letting out a heart-wrenching cry, jumped into the valley below. To this day, the mystery behind the action of the lady and the cow remains an enigma, but a temple was built there for the resident goddess of the mountain, and in commemoration of the cow's sacrifice, the mountain and the goddess began to be called Jeevadani - one who gives life (Patil 15- 16). Locals give this goddess the credit for the peacefulness and harmony of this region. Initially, in a

little cave, a small temple was built, and people would climb up the mountain path to worship the goddess. The popularity of the goddess as a fulfiller of dreams and prayers grew far and wide, and a concrete staircase of around 1400 steps to the temple was built. Now, a huge temple with modern amenities, including a ropeway to carry those unable to climb up, stands in its place.

The second temple in this region, whose origins are connected with the *Puranas*, is that of Vajreshwari in Vasai. As the name suggests, she is the goddess with the 'vajra', the lightning. The story of this temple states that it was on this hill that Sage Vishwamitra performed his penance to become the Brahmarishi. The god Indra, feeling threatened by the power of the penance, threw his 'vajra', the lightning, at the sage, who was deep in penance and did not realize the impending harm. The goddess Shakti or Parvati intervened, held the 'vajra' in her hand and threw it away on another mountain which flared up and so, began to be called the Mandakini when it cooled down - the 'manda' ('cool' or 'cooled down') 'agni' ('fire'). It also resulted in the seven spots where boiling water ripped through the earth's crust. These hot water geysers are still there at Vajreshwari and thousands of people with ailments or simple faith throng this area. A temple was built where the goddess is said to have stood, held and thrown the 'vajra'; she was the 'Vajreshwari' and the place too was named after her.

Another famous temple in the forests of Vasai is the Tungreshwar temple which is supposed to have been built by Parashuram, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu.

This is the area he settled down in after he left Kashmir. It is from here that he is said to have reclaimed the Konkan. The two ponds here, viz., the Parashuram Kund and the Ram Kund, are said to have been formed by the arrows shot by them when they were here. These are deceptively deep, and have been the cause of death by drowning of many tourists. The Chakreshwar Mahadev temple at Nirmal in Nalasopara too is said to

have been built by Ram when he was in exile here. The pond near the temple is also said to have been formed by Ram's arrow just like the Banganga in Mumbai.

There are places with their stories connected directly with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. For instance, the village of Chandeeep is considered as the place where Sage Sandipani, Krishna's guru, resided and that it was here that Krishna had received his training as warrior and administrator. The word 'chandeeep' is said to be a corruption of the word 'sandeepani'. The Shiva temple there is revered as an 'atmalinga', a linga naturally born out of the rock, and worshipped by the sage himself. There is a group of slate-like rocks, five on one sideband, one by an ancient tree, symbolizing the five Pandavas and Krishna. The Pandavas are said to have taken shelter here during their exile and listened to Krishna's discourses at the spot.

The next story is of the Chandika temple a few kilometers from Chandeeep at Juchandra, a hill at Naigaon. According to legend, it was built by the Pandavas themselves. It is said that the Pandavas would move around these thick forests when in exile. They would dig some of the caves in this region to protect themselves from the wild animals. It was on a 412 - foot high mountain cave on an island ('ju' in the local language) shaped like the crescent moon ('chandra') - the Juchandra - that they sculpted the idols of the goddesses Chandika, Kalika and Mahishasuramardhini. They also dug the pond near the temple (Patil Vasudev, 8-9). In 1540, the Portuguese governor Albuquerque, set fire to the area around the temple in the hope of looting it, but found no treasure. Attacked by honeybees, the Portuguese hastily retreated, leaving much of their ammunition there (Patil, 16). Today, much of the vegetation has gone due to the rapid urbanization of the area.

The last temple in focus is the Mahikavati temple at Vadrai village in Palghar. This nondescript little known temple is said to be the place where Ram and Lakshman were kept imprisoned by Ravan till Hanuman rescued them. This leads us to an interesting "telling" of the *Ramayana*,

viz., the *Kunkna Ramayana* or the tribal *Ramayana* of the Kunknas of Gujarat. The *Kunkna Ramayana* carries a story of how Ram and Lakshman were kidnapped by Ravan one night from their tents. He is said to have dug a tunnel under the sea-bed from the Mahikaviti temple in Lanka into their tents, kidnapped them in the dead of the night and imprisoned them there. When Hanuman comes to know of this, he jumps across the sea and fights the demon, Magardhaj, who is holding them. Their fight is among equals and at one point, Hanuman asks the demon who he is and is surprised to know that Magardhaj is his son. On inquiring about the origins of his son, Hanuman comes to know that as he had swum the ocean the first time he visited Lanka as Ram's emissary, his drops of sweat were ingested by a female crocodile, who gave birth to a son, Magardhaj, who grew up quickly because of his divine origins and was employed by Ravan as guard of the Mahikavati temple (Vadhu 72-75).

This interesting story leads to the conclusion that the area that the tribal *Ramayana* covers is that of today's Gujarat and Maharashtra and the sea that Ram and his monkey-army crossed was at this place. Local folklore says that the rocks that formed the bridge were taken from Tandulwadi, a rock-strewn mountain in Palghar. The Mahikavati temple, thus, becomes the link between the tribal and the 'ur' *Ramayana*, as Paula Richman calls the *Valmiki Ramayana* (Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas* 3). The *Ramayana* stories that are narrated by these uneducated and isolated villagers reveal another telling of the 'ur' *Ramayana*.

A lot of research in many fields is needed to unravel the history and mysteries behind such stories. So far, only a few local scholars have written about them in books in the local language, Marathi. There does not seem to be anything in English. Though the Archaeological Survey of India has started showing interest in this region since the past few years, access to the literature of this region, which is mostly oral, is difficult. The alarming rate at which the Vasai-Palghar belt is losing its old world charm because of rapid urbanization with its scant regard for the ancient,

and the invasion of television with its glamour quotient are threatening to destroy these stories. Very few of today's generation of even local people know or are aware of this history of their region. These stories are disappearing from the land like sand held in our hands. What William Dalrymple observes in the context of the *bhopas* of Rajasthan and their *Epic of Pabuji* in *Nine Lives*, is applicable here: "It was not lack of interest, but literacy itself, that was killing the oral epic" (95).

I dedicate this paper to those who evoked my interest in this culturally rich land, by narrating these stories to me, viz., to my friend and colleague, Mrs. Beena Patil and her father-in-law, Mr. Nandan Patil and to one of our college peons, Mr. Sunil Thakur. I express my gratitude to my former students, Bhushan Bhoir of Palghar and Bhushan Patil of Naigaon, for providing some of the stories that I have mentioned here.

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