

Parag Tandel's parents used to tell him a story that all parents in Thane's Chendani-Koliwada told their children: If he ventured to catch fish in the creek abutting the village, he would most certainly be attacked by the monster *maankaape*, or "neck cutter", that lurked on its banks. This piece of fiction, invented to save little ones from falling into the water, rarely stopped young Parag from fishing in that water body nor in the multiple lakes and fish farms nearby. Had he not found his calling in contemporary art, he would have liked to have sold dried fish for a living. However, of late the artist has been drifting closer to his Koli origins.

The most recent manifestation of this is the Tandel Fund of Archive, which he co-founded with his artist wife, Kadambari Koli-Tandel, who also grew up in his fishing village. The latter also deals with the Koli community in her practice, looking particularly at forms of jewellery and costumes. The duo intends to record the unique and shifting cultural histories of more than 40 *koliwad*s (Koli villages) that are located within Mumbai but which are strangely removed from it. But rather than use this material for contemporary art, they will show it in the form of quarterly pop-up museums. "Both of our works deal with Kolis. But we realised there are areas which go out of our practice and which we need to show," says 40-year-old Parag.

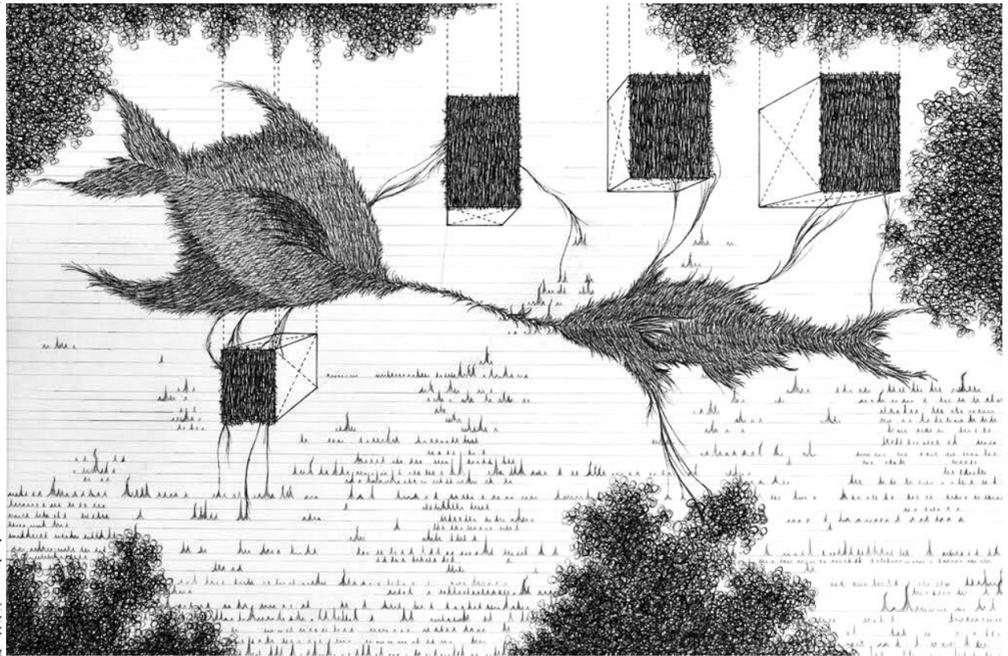
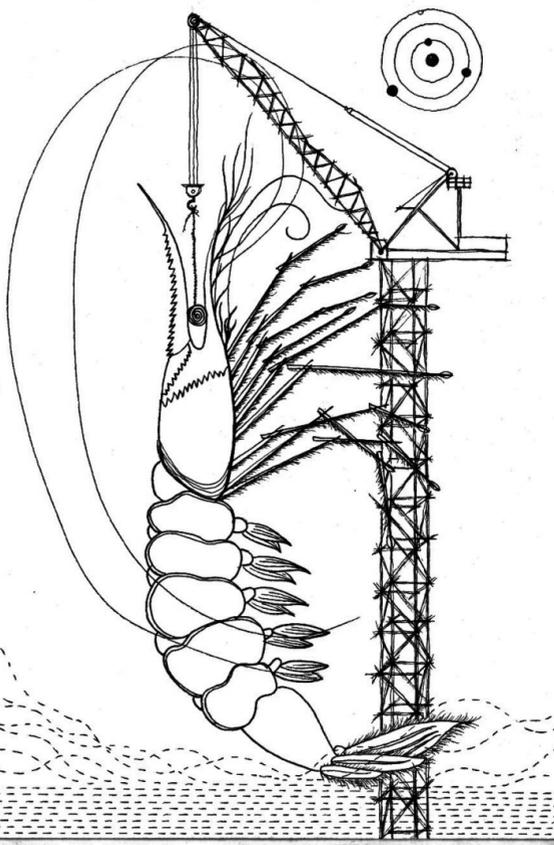
Kolis are among the aboriginal inhabitants of Mumbai. S M Edwardes wrote in the *Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island* in 1909: "Older than the cocoa-nut palm, older than the Bhandari palm-tapper, are the Koli fishing folk of Bombay." According to him, among them one could likely find "the blood of the men of the Stone Age". The Kolis are said to have developed the coastlines of the seven islands that would later form one city, but as the British administration began "reclamation" of land in the late 19th century, the fisherfolk were slowly pushed to smaller pockets. They have settled in Cuffe Parade, Backbay, Sion, Worli, Vasai and Uran among other regions.

The Tandel's first pop-up was held last month near their own *koliwada*. It dealt with the work of the late Dattatray Mahadeo Koli (1931-2004), a photographer who had shot the wedding of Parag's parents. His collection of black-and-white photos threw up many colourful surprises. "He documented the city on varied levels," says Parag, displaying the original prints which bear scenes of Koli family functions, political meetings, film sets, as well as self-portraits shot with a timer. The story goes he had been gambling to fund his photography habit and got a camera from his parents as a pre-condition for getting married. But the gambling never quite stopped. He had been ambitious by recording his local landscape and also working in the bigger world of Mumbai. He went by the pseudonym "Diana", a stylish nickname coined by his friends in show business, notable among whom was Raj Kapoor.

What the Tandel's also found interesting was the fact that some of the photos were stamped with the words "artist and photographer". "It was rare for a studio photographer in the 1950s to have seen himself as an artist." Dilip

Raghurajpur, who brought with them paintings, toys and other products priced between ₹50 and ₹60,000 made by 140 households in their village. Additionally, 17 famous contemporary artists donated their artworks for a silent auction to raise even more funds for the campaign. "We raised over ₹6.5 lakh which has gone directly to the artisans," she says. "Over the coming year, we plan to set up an online platform and hold more exhibitions." The next one is slated for early August, for which DLF has already promised space.

Jacob and her cohorts at Kala Chaupal have their work cut out in the months, even years ahead. "Recovering from a disaster like this can take years," she says. Without support, she fears that many of these artisans could fall into debt or migrate to bigger cities and leave their art practice. "Also, the sooner they resume practising their art, the better their recovery will be," she says. This will, however, take time. Das says that one-and-a-half months after the cyclone, none of them have been able to resume work. "Our houses are still in a shambles and the sun is too hot for us to work during the day," he says. "And power cuts make it impossible to work at night!" Tourism hasn't revived either. Kala Chaupal



(Clockwise from far left) Images from Parag Tandel's contemporary art practice, which grapples with the changing world of Kolis; an archival image of a family function in Chendani Koliwada

# Tales from the Koliwada

Two Koli artists from Thane are documenting the shifts in their ancient community's identity through pop-up museums, says Ranjita Ganesan



Mahadev Koli, "Diana" Koli's son, says his father became something of a local hero after Dilip Kumar asked for him during a visit to Thane. Yet, the photos remained largely forgotten until they were shown at the Khule Kaladalan, a small open-air gallery run by the Thane Municipal Corporation, where Diana had been employed for a period. Digital copies of the photographs were used as some of the originals are in delicate condition. They are to be restored from their negatives, and some unseen 35 mm slides will be screened in a follow-up exhibition about the artist.

For most people, 'Koli' means music and dance. That is it," observes

Kadambari. Indeed, the popular imagining of the culture is borrowed from superficial references in Hindi films such as in the song "Galyan Sakli Sonyachi" featured in *Toofan aur Bijli* (1975) and later *Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahi* (1991). In Mumbai's museums, the Kolis are typically a footnote. Occasionally, Kolis come to public attention because of their opposition to large projects affecting the sea such as the coastal road and the Shivaji memorial recently, and the Bandra Worli Sealink before that. City walking tours advertise *koliwad*s as a "different side of Mumbai" and charge as much as ₹3,500 to visit one, listen to an expert, eat and take home a souvenir. One encouraging development has been the launch of an annual seafood festival by the Kolis of Versova to mark the beginning of the fishing season.

The natural tensions between tradition and modernisation that exist within the community were perhaps amplified in the Tandel household, where Parag's mother sourced and sold fish and his father held down a company job while also helping with her shop. Historically, his *koliwada* had been a mercantile village where shipping rather than fishing was the primary occupation. Thane, once being a halt port for ships, and later connected

with Mumbai by the maiden local train in 1853, encountered and embraced the new relatively quickly. The onset of Nehruvian modernism there a century later is glimpsed in Diana's photographs. Capitalism took people further away from fishing and towards aspirations such as speaking English and working in offices. Such hierarchies were less visible in Vitawa, just across the creek, where the duo has their studio and where some families still fish for themselves. The Koli language which survives in other *koliwad*s has disappeared in Thane.

Parag hopes the archive will eventually help address the disconnect with fishing in his area. He has broached related questions in his practice of 20 years as illustrator and sculptor. TARQ gallerist Hena Kapadia has showed his work from 2016, including his first solo exhibition *Chronicle*, in which he evoked water pollution by crafting sculptures that resembled sea creatures out of toxic transparent resin. "He has since looked at a variety of aspects that both directly and indirectly affect the Koli community, including focusing on the idea of community and heritage through the lenses of development, food, ritual and nature," says Kapadia. "I like to work with poisonous materials because that is what

human beings are. We destroy things," says Parag. Having seen fishermen in Vitawa return with large amounts of trash in their nets, he fashioned a giant fish out of a fishing net and filled it with debris. This is in contrast to the early years of his career when he was consumed by the subjects of migration and urbanisation in Mumbai at large.

In their apartment where they also stock their art, the couple seems excited and overwhelmed at their archival project. Over the years, they had tinkered with ideas of starting an art residency or a permanent museum. Those concepts would have needed investment and space, but the pop-up format appears to be a malleable and less expensive way to engage with the fishing community. They have already archived a number of traditional and even lost recipes. Their forthcoming pop-ups, to be held at various *koliwad*s, will show how each village has its own variant of dishes like *umbar*, a deep-fried snack served in weddings and usually made from wheat, urad and jaggery.

Keeping in view community sentiments, the pop-ups will take place during Koli festivals such as *Narali Purav* and *Sakhar Chauth*. The archivists expect that the historical documents shared by the Portugal government in 2017 will improve our understanding about the community's culture between the 16th and 19th centuries. The idea for the Tandel Fund of Archive actually came from an 18th-century concept, when villages raised a fund to keep homes running when some members were away at sea. By reviving it, the pop-up museum's title itself becomes an archive.

Parag Tandel  
Co-founder, Tandel Fund of Archive

'I LIKE TO WORK WITH POISONOUS MATERIALS BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE. WE DESTROY THINGS'

PHOTOS: COURTESY KALA CHAUPAL

instead of making them dependent on dole. "For we don't just need to rebuild people's homes and lives after a disaster — we've to rebuild their souls too!"

## Disaster management

Kala Chaupal, a Gurugram-based trust, is helping artisans rebuild their lives in the aftermath of Cyclone Fani, writes Geetanjali Krishna

When Cyclone Fani swept through Odisha's famous craft village, Raghurajpur in Puri district, on May 3 this year, it not only destroyed most houses in its wake, but also wreaked havoc on a huge number of crafts stored there, including their treasured Pattachitra paintings. "As someone who's working to create linkages between traditional and contemporary arts, I mourned the destruction of those heritage works," says Leenika Jacob of Kala Chaupal, the Gurugram-based public trust and non-profit that uses visual and supporting arts to drive positive social and cultural change. "I read that artists there were willing to sell their works for a pittance, only to get some capital to rebuild their homes and lives," she recalls. This prompted Jacob to spearhead the Rise4Odisha campaign with Humanitarian Aid International, Aapsa Art, Prabhaav Foundation and a host of concerned artists. "The idea was to create a direct sales platform for the Raghurajpur artisans so enable them to rebuild their lives without feeling beholden to anyone," she says.

The first such exhibition, the Gotipua Project, was organised in a record two weeks. Kala Chaupal invited four artists from

plans to invite eminent artists to Raghurajpur in October to create art installations there. "We want to drive tourism to the village to generate more revenues for the locals," she says.

For the artisans who participated in the first exhibition in Gurugram, the experience went beyond that of mere commerce. "The sympathy I got from all the buyers I spoke to was like a balm to my soul," says Raghunath Das who lost his home and about ₹60,000 worth of artworks. What moved him the most was when a buyer picked up three of his father's rain-damaged paintings. "He said they represented the ordeal we'd survived," he says. "I was moved to tears..."

At a juncture when extreme climate events are becoming frighteningly common, the Rise4Odisha campaign demonstrates a rehabilitation model that empowers survivors



(Clockwise from above) Art demonstration at the Gotipua Project exhibition; homes devastated by Cyclone Fani in Raghurajpur; visitors with an artist at the exhibition



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