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Artisanal Fishing from the Kolis

SEARCH



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Through his archival project 'Let there be Bounty Everyday', Parag Tandel

highlights the sustainable living practices of the indigenous Koli community, and lessons we can take away for a post-pandemic life.

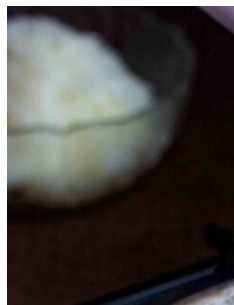
If there is one thing that COVID-19 and lockdown has brought into sharp focus, it is that we took for granted everything about our food supply, the people who grow it, and the supply chain that brings it to us. It forced us to ration what we had in stock, to stretch ingredients and learn to cook in creative ways.

Tapping into these very real anxieties is a video series by Mumbai-based artist and Koli (fishermen) community chronicler, Parag Tandel. Each Friday through lockdown, the artist shared a recipe that uses seafood and other pantry-staple ingredients from Koli homes, on [Instagram](#). These videos, titled ‘Let there be Bounty Everyday’ are part of a larger art series, ‘Surviving Quarantine,’ by Goan art gallery, Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts.

Tandel’s project took shape in the early weeks of lockdown, when he and his mother, Kamal Tandel, had to dip into their reserve of dried seafood, as fresh fish was no longer available. The straightforward [videos](#) work with simple subtitles and a background score that features folk songs from the Koli

community. “This project is not just about food, but also our history and ecology,” explains Tandel.

WHAT TO COOK THIS WEEK



Bhatt ki Dal Ka
Phaanu: A Creamy
Mountain Lunch



Recipe for
Kashmiri Salan
Walah Chawal



Recipe for Sticky-
Sweet Honey
Chilli Potatoes



Recipe for
Tibetan Momos
with Sepen
Dipping Sauce



Recipe for Spicy
Schezwan Chilli
Paneer

In a video [showcasing the recipe for Umbar](#) (dried shrimp and eggplant curry), Tandel explains that this is a dish prepared mainly during wedding feasts, and is a fairly recent addition to the Koli repertoire — as is the use of vegetable oil, which was not traditionally part of their cooking. The video studies changes in the Koli diet, effected by the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century. He adds, “Earlier, it was forbidden that we, the indigenous community of the seven-island estuarine lands, eat juvenile and pregnant fish. But Portuguese influence changed that. Our food too, was influenced by the colonisers.”

These stories and recipes are part of the

Tandel Fund of Archives, founded by Tandel and his wife Kadambari, to document and promote cultural narratives that are integral to Mumbai's layered history. For the Tandels and many other Koli people, cooking dried fish before the monsoon season, meant breaking away from tradition. Dry fish is saved for the four monsoon months (June to September) of incessant rain, when all fishing activity is forced to halt. "But during the pandemic lockdown, we were not able to store fresh fish, and had to cook our stock of dry fish before the season. So, yes, we had to break the cycle in these unprecedented times," says Tandel.

Fish and the Koli Community

Fish is an inseparable part of Koli identity and everyday life. In their kitchens, it is treated in a hundred different ways. Fish is often cooked with vegetables like eggplant, tomatoes, potatoes, and drumstick. Wild vegetables like the 'davla,' that grow in salty marshes, are cooked with crab. There is great emphasis on not wasting any part of the fish. "Spare parts are savoured — we eat the head, eggs, and the intestine. We cook the backbone of bigger fish and suck out the marrow inside," says Tandel. Favourite ingredient pairings include coconut, tamarind

paste, and Koli masala (made of several ingredients, much like garam masala). And these curries are best enjoyed with rice, rotis or vada.



Shrimp is used to make cutlets, bhajias, vada, and even pancakes. Several varieties of shrimps are eaten, and a favourite is baby shrimp, locally known as 'javla' or 'koleem'. Another beloved and fairly unique preparation is kheema made with clams and octopus. Tandel's mother has documented close to 50 such recipes, to soon be compiled and published as a book.

Dry fish

According to Tandel, the technique of using salt to sun-dry fish comes from Oman, where kippered fish is part of their culture. "Omani traders used to sell dry fish on our coasts," he explains. In the Koli community, dried fish is used in myriad ways, and not just as dried shrimp or mackerel kismur (salad) with chopped onion and grated coconut, a preparation most of us are familiar with. "Generally, when I say dried fish, one thinks of bombil or Bombay Duck. But there are many varieties of Bombay duck, four of five of which are based on size alone. My paternal grandmother, who used to sell dried fish, would deal in 33 varieties. Now there are hardly 15 or thereabouts," says Tandel.

One of the primary reasons for decline in the variety of dried fish is that the number of villages practicing salting and

drying, have decreased. “Now, as few as three villages — Madh, Marve and Uttan — still practice our trade, out of the 42 koliwadadas found on the coast of Mumbai. In these three villages, the water pollution is not as severe as elsewhere, and they still use the ancient techniques of fishing. In other villages, especially near Thane Creek, people have given up fishing because of pollution from the industries and refineries in the neighbourhood,” explains Tandel. “I still remember when I was a seven-year-old, we would find tiny shrimp on the banks of Chendani Koliwada’s waterfront. But not anymore.”

Sustainable fishing

Artisanal fishing, a practice that has evolved over thousands of years, still draws attention for its merits on sustainability. “These include ancient fishing techniques like spear fishing, angling, trapping, netting, and bow and arrow. Fishermen use 10-12 different fishing nets according to fish size and species. They catch fish only for a day, and release big fish back into the sea,” he says.

But today, artisanal fishing has been largely replaced by commercial fishing that uses trawlers with gill and purse nets that catch a wide variety of marine

life, most of it non-edible fish. During lockdown, trawlers that returned to land after being sea-bound for two weeks, could not sell their fish as markets were closed. “We saw a lot of fish wasted, just thrown back to the ocean — more than 5000 tonnes! But this will never happen with artisanal/traditional fishermen, as they catch less than a 100 kilogram of fish and operate primarily in river creeks,” says Tandel.

Tandel suggests that non-artisanal fishing methods also compromise the health of the fish. He uses the example of rawas and dodya rawas, both of which are considered ‘big fish’. A single rawas used to be between 3 and 4 feet long, but now, average size has reduced to 1.5 feet. Dodya, which used to be close to 5.5 feet, is now only about 2 feet in length. “My maternal grandmother used to sell only big fish, of massive size. But big fish need time to grow. Today, they are now harvested before they mature, and you never see that size in the markets anymore. Also, demand tends to be lopsided, favouring fish like surmai, pomfret, and squid. All this affects the food pyramid, and consequently, affects ocean biodiversity.”

With the archival project, Tandel hopes to bring focus back to the Koli community, highlighting their

sustainable practices in the kitchen, and showcasing their strong bond with the ecosystem. “Food has layered history; this is not just about cooking recipes, but about documenting a culture that is fast disappearing. The (Koli) people themselves have forgotten their identity in this huge metropolis.”

Arati Das is a freelance journalist who writes about the art, culture and ecology of Goa.

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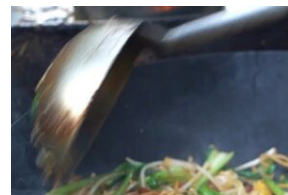
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