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## A new exhibition by Parag Tandel, the artist-archivist from Koliwada

In his latest show, artist Parag Tandel sculpts personal narratives of the Koli community, which is fast losing out on its ancient ways



Parag Tandel at his show, 'Archipelagic Archivist'. Photo: Tarq/the artist

By **Riddhi Doshi**

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What is it that defines art? How can one make it relevant? These questions have troubled artists through centuries. It was to establish an immediate context to Indian art that masters such as S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain and F.N. Souza founded the Bombay Progressive Artists Group in 1947. The idea was to break away from the British visual language and introduce Indian art concepts to the world. Even artists of the Bengal School of Art, led by Abanindranath Tagore, were seeking answers to the same questions.

Decades later, Parag Tandel, a graduate of Mumbai's Sir JJ School of Art is on a similar quest. His inquiry—albeit a more localised and focused one— has extended to the show, 'Archipelagic Archivist', currently on display at Tarq, a contemporary art space in Mumbai. Hailing from the Koli community, settled in Chandeni Koliwada village, Thane district, Tandel responds to what it means to be an artist from a traditional fishing community. He delves deep into the history of the community from the time when Mumbai was just an archipelago of seven islands. The Kolis, who worshipped nature, and whose homes overlooking the sea were declared slums to make way for high-rises, are compelled to forego their traditions, thanks to rapid urbanisation, politics and marine pollution. Their ancient ways of life, which have the potential of providing solutions to today's climate crisis, are getting lost. In such a scenario, what does it mean to be an artist from the Koli community? "When you unlearn Western ideologies, you start seeing within. And you end up asking yourself, 'What if there were no paints, what would then be the Koli art?'," says Tandel.

He expresses this inquiry in a myriad ways—through mummies of the city's native Bombay duck fish, sculptures made of Jambul wood and nets made of fibres, recipes of traditional Koli dishes written on rice paper, and Dhokra sculptures from Bastar. For the last set of works, the artist went to Chattisgarh to learn the ancient bell metal craft of the Ojha metalsmiths for a comparative study of material culture of a landlocked community. "The process helped me reflect on and understand my (Koli) material culture better, and about decolonising materials in my art practice," says Tandel. His work tells you interconnected stories from the time of the Portuguese invasion to the construction of Mumbai's coastal road through different materials and narratives that do not necessarily follow the Western definition of art. "Parag expresses narratives, motives and materials from his community knowledge, which are then transformed via his unique artistic lens," says Shaunak Mahbubani, the curator of the show.

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'Arrival of Port Wine' (2023). Courtesy: Tarq/the artist

Mahbubani is interested in autonarrative practices, which come from personal, community-based or ancestral-lived experiences. “This is primarily art that draws from lived experiences and brings out the complexity and richness that we don’t see within ethnographic practice. These objects allow us to look to the past, as well as the future simultaneously,” they add.

In boat-shaped sculptures, fashioned from the Jambul tree, the viewers are introduced to the effects of 17th-century policies, which outlawed age-old Jambul wine-making processes for those who had been converted to Christianity. The ban on indigenous wine was the first among many ways in which the Kolis’ age-old traditions were put to an end. The Jambul tree is significant to the community. During Holi, a few branches of the trees, grown in the Koliwadas (Koli villages), are distributed and shared among neighbours and burnt during the festival as a symbolic burning of evil, and to welcome spring and pray for a fertile season of fishing. “People, however, started cutting these trees to make room for modern construction, or they sold the land in which the trees once stood,” adds Tandel. The log of wood used in the exhibition hails from a tree planted by the artist in his ancestral village.

In the publication accompanying the exhibition, titled ‘Ek Bagal Mein Chand Hoga Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan’ (Moon on one hand and rotis on the other), Tandel introduces readers to recipes collected from Koli kitchens—a food culture that’s also under threat from rapid urbanisation and oceanic pollution. “The creation of MIDC (Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation) destroyed our ecosystem,” says Tandel. He claims that ten decades after the building of MIDC, the pH levels of nearby water alarmingly deteriorated (within a range of three kilometres) in which artisanal fishing was done. The destruction, of course, continues. The construction of the coastal road is another blow to Kolis’ traditional occupation and the old way of life, including their culinary culture.

“Even the Gods have changed,” says Tandel. On fish-shaped, blue-coloured fibre sculptures hanging from the ceiling, titled ‘Into the Bones Blue’ series, you read ‘Aai Ekvira Prasanna’ in Devanagari script. It’s the name of Kolis’ *kul devi* or the community’s protector goddess. “We have always worshipped nature. The pantheon includes the god of the tides, the whale shark god and the moon god,” says Tandel. But just like everything else, these Gods have been forgotten and people are worshipping human deities. That’s another link with the ocean lost.

“It’s so hard to think of a non-ethnocentric deity. The ones we are exposed to from childhood have always been given a human form. But thinking about them the way the Kolis always have helps us connect with the beautiful and natural energy around us,” says Mahbubani.

In another work, Tandel establishes a link with other indigenous people from Chhattisgarh. ‘Into The Bones’ is a collaboration with metalwork artists from Bastar, melding indigenous artistic techniques from the two regions to develop a series of 12 intricate mixed-media sculptures. “These materials represent jal, jameen, jungle (water, earth and forest). For us Kolis, the ocean is our forest, but the city sees it as a dumping ground.” says Tandel.



The show compels the viewers to think about the significance of traditional knowledge, culture and people of the land that we are fast destroying.

*Archipelagic Archivist is on view at Tarq, K. K. (Navsari) Chambers, Fort, Mumbai, from 11 am to 6 pm (Tuesday to Sunday), until 30 September.*

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