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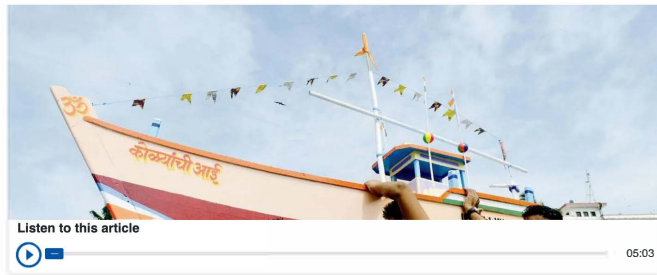
## The story behind the Koli

Updated on: 02 March, 2024 08:31 AM IST | Mumbai  
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An upcoming studio visit is a deep-dive into the life of contemporary Koli artist and chronicler Parag Tandel, which reveals the interactions that link his community with his passion for art



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05:03

Sometime between 1987 and 1988, a 10-year-old boy found his calling while on a school picnic to Gorai Beach. He collected seashells that were in sight to create one of the first art pieces he was ever truly proud of. "I took a cardboard and stuck all the shells together, rather shabbily, using Fevicol. I showed it off to my teachers and classmates. I didn't understand why they didn't like it. In my eyes, it was the most beautiful thing I had created," laughs contemporary artist and auto ethnographer Parag Tandel, who is now best known for his huge body of works that document and safeguard the life and history of one of the earliest original communities of Mumbai — the Kolis.



A fisherwoman participates in the rituals on the festival in Mahim Koliwada. File Pics

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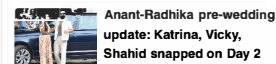
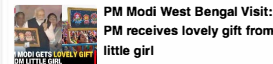
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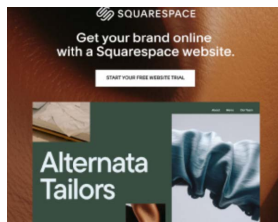
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"The Tandel Fund of Archives [TFA] is a means to counter-archive a recent claim by a scholar that Kois are not originally from Mumbai. It brings to fore our history and facts because only a Koli can tell you the accurate history of our community," shares Tandel, whose works, be it for his art of the TFA, are stringently research-oriented. One such artwork that documents the colonisation by the Portuguese is the Arrival of Port Wine 3 (2023) and the impact on the age-old tradition of jambul wine-making once enjoyed by the Kois. The Portuguese outlawed the traditional fermentation process to promote imported Port wines. Tandel's artwork was a sculpture of ships constructed out of the wood of the jambul tree the artist planted with a friend in 2011. "The ship also had Portuguese coins to signify the colonial loot," the artist informs.



**Parag Tandel works on a sculpture at his studio in Thane**

On March 17, art community Art and Wonderment will step into the Koli artist's creative headspace as they walk through his studio and witness Tandel at work. "Often, people wish to engage with art and either don't have company or feel intimidated by the art," says Art and Wonderment co-founder Nishita Zachariah, "We often host walks to galleries that are conversational and light-hearted. We do our research and demystify the artworks for them. Our studio visits take it a step further and allow participants to further break the barriers and connect with the artist, witness them at work and let them see the many trials and errors before the finished works are displayed in the galleries."

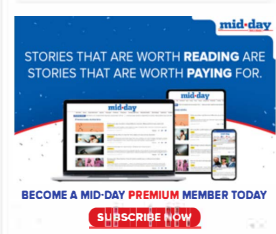


**A sculpture by Tandel currently on display at Indian Ceramics Triennale exhibition in New Delhi**

Zachariah will conduct the four-hour-long walk with co-founder Alisha Sadikot. This visit is an extension of the ongoing Indian Ceramics Triennale exhibition in Delhi, where some of Tandel's works are currently on display. The participants will begin with a studio visit in Thane, followed by a traditional Koli lunch prepared by Tandel's mother Kamal Kashinath Tandel, and his wife Kadambari Koli-Tandel. The group will then return to the studio to learn more about the Tandel Archive Fund.



Freelance cricket writer/ broadcaster/ host of cricket with chai podcast





**Arrival of Port Wine 3. Pic courtesy/Tarq Mumbai**

An art enthusiast who has been close to his community for as long as he can recall, Tandel reminisces how he requested his father to shift him from a Convent school to a Koli school because he missed speaking in his mother tongue as a child. "I was always good at art and my parents didn't mind me pursuing it.



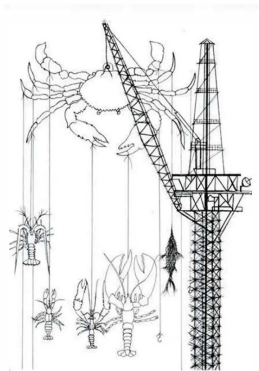
**Kadambari Koli-Tandel and the artist**

Although once, I told my mother that even if I take up art as a career, I will never stop selling fish. She replied saying that I still would be selling fish, even though it's in the form of art," Tandel reminisces, adding how this response stuck with him and inspires him to dig deeper into the history of the community. "I don't use one specific material for my artworks. For me, the material is a metaphor," he says, explaining that his artworks are a blend of materials that reflect traditions, food, culture, history and religion of the Kolis.



**A traditional home-cooked Koli meal**

"Not many are aware that creating illustrations is my hobby. I will show the participants my sketchbook during the walk," Tandel reveals. He will also talk about how Koli food in festivals is becoming commercial, gradually departing from the traditional food that they eat at home, and an upcoming project on creating a food museum boasting of over 50 traditional Koli recipes. Zachariah tells us that if time permits, and participants are up to the task, they will visit a nearby Koliwada with Tandel, and learn stories from his childhood.



**An artwork by Tandel**

On: March 17; 11 am to 4 pm at Parag Tandel's Studio, Kalva, Thane.  
 Cost: Rs 1,200; Rs 1,600 (including lunch)  
 Log on to: urbanaut.app (for registration); @artandwonderment (for more details)

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