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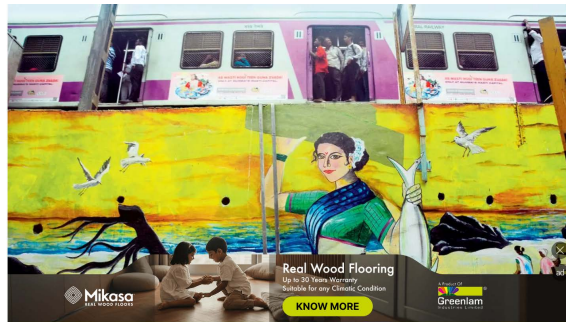
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Shriram Iyengar | shriram.iyengar@mid-day.com

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Today, on Koli Bhasha Divas (September 1), artists and researchers Parag and Kadambari Koli-Tandel reveal their four-year-project to document the slowly fading Koli language in the first dictionary of the language

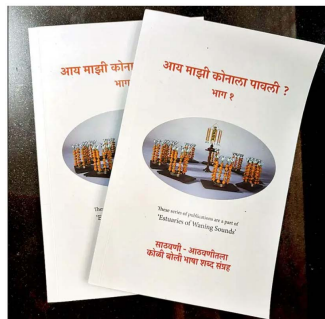


A mural of a Koli fisherwoman on a wall at Chendani Koliwada in Thane. File Pic/Satej Shinde

There is a comforting familiarity in sounds. Coming from an aspiring writer, it might sound pretentious; but it is true. Artist and researcher Kadambari Koli-Tandel terms it the 'last thread to the past'. Over the last four years, Kadambari and her husband, Parag Tandel, have been travelling to various koliwadass across Mumbai documenting culture, practices, objects and above all, language. This project, Estuaries of Waning Sounds (a series of projects to document the language that began in 2019), backed by their initiative The Tandel Fund Archives, will arrive with the publication of the first part of their series, Koli Bhasha Sangraha dictionary today.

History in spoken verse

The history of the koliwadass — the settlements of the **Kolis**, the original inhabitants of the city — might date back to almost 10,000 years. However, the language itself has been amorphous. "Ours is a functional language. We vocalised these sounds for our daily use from fishing to cooking and activities on the shore," she explains. In 2019, the Tandel Fund Archives began as a project. The effort, Parag adds, was to revive the language, and its nuances.

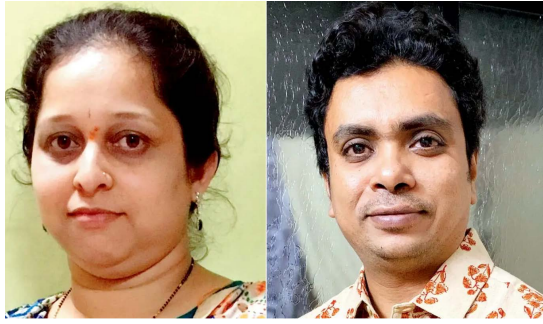


The published dictionary titled Aay Majhi Konala Pavli

This need is most evident close to home; at Chendani Koliwada in Thane where the couple hails from. The slow erosion of language has taken place over many years. "Nobody in Chendani speaks the **language**. The reason is that the region of Thane, for instance, was historically a mercantile region. With slow colonialism, children have slowly lost a connection to it. Thankfully, many Koliwadass around Mumbai still have native speakers," she explains. With every passing generation, this thread only grows weaker.

No written proof

The Koli Bhasha also lacks a script. "Even among native speakers there is a dual identity. They often are embarrassed to speak it in public," Kadambari reveals. This, the researchers add, is evident of the classist and casteist subtext that often accompanies native cultures.

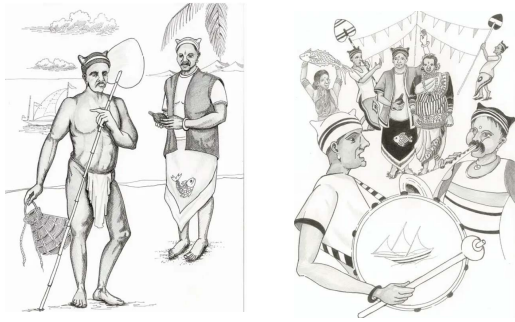


Kadambari Koli-Tandel and Parag Tandel

Hidden stories

Languages can be survivors, though. They often pass down through recipes, folktales, ritual songs, or even anecdotes. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observes, the limits of imagination are often defined by the limits of language. For the Kolis though, the rising urbanisation has also caused a shift in this space.

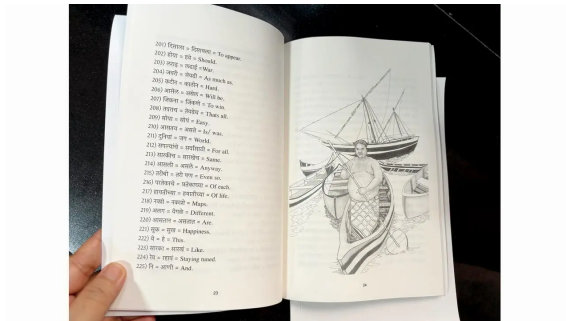
"Being a functional language, its role defined its use. For instance, one part of our research led to the words used as call signs by Koli seafarers. Since it was hard to be heard over the waves at sea, they would use a particular cadence according to the rhythm of the tide, to call out to each other on the far side of the boat. This was called 'Oh Dene' [To call out]," Kadambari shares. Another thread of documentation is in the strain of songs, and Dhavla songs — sung to solemnise Koli weddings by female dhavlarins. As of today, there is only one dhavlarin left in the Thane Koliwada, she adds.



Illustrations depicting the Koli way of life. Illustrations courtesy/Kadambari Koli-Tandel

Gatherers in the city

With sound playing a key role, the couple sought to capture it in the dictionary. "We have documented it in the Devanagari script, but we wanted to retain the rhythm, the cadence and flow of the Koli words," she says. As for the **community**, there is a feeling of being sidelined in rapidly expanding urban spaces.



A page from the dictionary describing Koli phrases and meanings. Pics Courtesy/Tandel Fund Archives

With the first part of the dictionary now published, the couple are now looking to document further, expanding to a possible physical museum space in Chendani. "It might take us a couple of years, but it is definitely on our mind," reveals Parag.

"Ours is a protest museum, except that it is a silent protest," Kadambari emphasises. Some silences speak loud, they say.

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