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Thinking Koli

Artist-activist Parag Tandel makes inspired use of his indigenous heritage to express the Koli world view

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Mumbai Mirror · 27 Sept 2026, 4:00 am IST

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Parag Tandel at TARQ with Estuaries of Waning Sounds: Koli Dictionary Project 11

Direct descendants of the first Mumbaikars continue to live where their ancestors did, even as the megalopolis has mushroomed all around them. The city's 20 official Koliwadās are "a remarkable example of the Indian capacity for pursuing a way of life tenaciously without reference to other ways of life being just as tenaciously pursued all around them" wrote Gillian Tindall in her incisive and hugely influential 1982 book, *City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay*. "It is rather as if a prehistoric encampment were existing self-sufficiently on a corner of Hampstead Heath in London, or a Red Indian tribe in Central Park."

So much of Mumbai is undergirded by Koli roots. Mumba Devi herself is one of their patron deities, and we still use their original names for city neighbourhoods every day: Colaba (from Kola-bhat), Mazagaon (Machchagaon), Apollo Bunder (Palva Bunder), Dongri (after the hill that once loomed over the spot), and many others. The seminal contributions of this remarkably adaptable and resourceful indigenous community also extend to the present day. They still dominate the lucrative regional seafood economy as they have from the founding of the city hundreds of years ago, as what the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) describes as its "primary producer group." What is more, it is undoubtedly the nearly round-the-clock presence of working Koli women in the Mumbai streets that has made the city public spaces historically safer than others in India.

"For us these seven islands are still mapped by their villages, the sea and its tides, and our deities," says Parag Tandel, the outstandingly thoughtful artist/activist whose solo exhibition, *Salted Caviar* at TARQ in Fort (until October 17) provides an eye-opening reminder of what Mumbai was built upon, and how it still breathes. There are beautiful sculptures, cyanotypes, textures and textiles here, described by the gallery as "four new bodies of work that move between geological deep time, living knowledge systems, and the ecological and political struggles of Mumbai's Koli fishing communities." It is an important, timely artistic intervention, and sensational show. To me it seems clear, the city art scene has found

its latest star.

I was fortunate to view *Salted Caviar* (the exhibition name refers to the iconic fish roe called *Khari Gaboli* in Marathi) alongside Tandel, whose artworks and activism—often partnered with his wife Kadambari Koli Tandel—I have been following with growing admiration for several years. In 2019, this innovative duo founded the wonderful Tandel Fund of Archives, in tribute to another 14th century collective that supported community members "during their time of necessity." Their 21st century version was created because "since thousands of years Kolis have fished, rowed, and inhabited these estuarial lands, as the realm around them has altered. They are edged by unsustainable infrastructure, these indigenous tribes of seven islands are struggling like the ocean around them because of the ever-encroaching megalopolis in their fishing grounds and villages, their rich estuaries are choking with metropolitan pollutants. We are very much concerned about the proper and ethical

documentation of these indigenous tribes, whose rooted culture is on [the] verge of extinction."

Tandel's art is richly interwoven with his archival research, but it is his mastery of materials that makes it utterly beguiling. I loved his plankton-shaped 'Ancestors' sculptures, made from "oceanic fossil stones," and especially the gorgeous *Estuaries of Waning Sounds: Koli Dictionary Project* series of playful and profound logographs (symbols that represent words) made from stainless steel wrapped in cotton and polyester thread, and presented in spare white vitrines. These are blockbuster artworks: an astonishing turtle filled with eggs, (it represents a fishing technique), a stunning filigreed crab (for the Kolis themselves) and another in the shape of Colaba Reef, which stands in for the prized bombil fish. Their totemic power blurs away the walls between the gallery and the city, so that it feels like the past and present flow together as one.

"As this city has grown and developed, all the different newcomers brought along or developed their own power structures, and overlaid them in our minds," said Tandel to me, "but nothing has managed to displace the Kolis, who have always remained present in

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