+A.S.Raman
+Abanindranath Tagore
+Abanindranath Tagore, translated by Kshitis Roy
+Adip Dutta
+Adris Banerji
+Ajay J. Sinha
+Ajit Mookerjee
+Akbar Padamsee
+Ambalal J. Patel
+Amreeta Das
+Ananda K. Coomaraswamy
+Anindo Sen
+Anis Farooqi
+Anita Dube
+Anjali Sircar
+Ankan Kazi
+Aradhana Thakur
+Arshiya Lokhandwala
+Arthur R. Slater
+Arunava Banerjee
+Arundhati Bhan
+Arundhati Chauhan
+Arushi Vats

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Parag Tandel's Sea of Stories

On October 8, 2026, at Mumbai's TARQ art gallery, artists Parag Tandel and Kadambari Koli held a one-hour presentation on the Tandel Fund of Archives (TFA), originally a 14th-century collective founded to support the Koli people. The new TFA, resuming the collective's work in essence, is a self-funded, living, ethnographic archive and pop-up museum, co-founded by the artists in 2019, at a time when they realized that Mumbai's indigenous Koli community had little to no representation in the city's museums and galleries.

The event titled "Shore as Archive: Reclaiming Koli Memory, Knowledge and Histories from the Megalopolis" was designed as a concise run-through of a multi-armed project that spans culture, ritual, language and ecology. It constitutes a rich collection of material culture comprising photographs, found objects from Koliwadas (fishing villages) and dead river estuaries (like fish bones, cartilage and vertebrae), and artisanal tools. These highlight the community's historical ties with the land and its waters, and also increasing concerns around urbanization and industrialization that have led to displacement, the loss of traditional vocations, and large-scale ecological destruction. The TFA, through engagement with over 200 Koliwadas in Mumbai, has also featured intangible elements such as participatory practices aimed at preserving the community's oral histories and memories, knowledge systems, language, food and music, through activities like mummification, rice-roti making and dried fish recipe contests, folk song performances, workshops and gatherings to collect lost words and songs, and publications documenting Koli recipes.

During the presentation, Parag spoke of how in 2019, several Koli villages were declared slums, that further facilitated encroachment and disruption of shore work and livelihoods, but also led him and Kadambari to begin "archiving evidence." For the community, it was important to build "safe spaces" in the face of threats to their history and identity, and to reclaim their past and reassert their contemporary identity "by letting the people make their own museum."

This is also why the TFA must continue to be a digital archive. Kadambari told us, "We think of it as a living archive and so, it needs to be with the people who are its custodians. We cannot give you what they can give you. We are just a medium for you to get connected with them." She explained that if a family has owned an object for centuries, the TFA's practice is to keep it with the custodians. This ensures that if enthusiasts want to engage further with the collections and stories, they will have to visit and directly engage with the Kolis, learning about the object from them. It is the desire to retain these experiences as "living memory" that has prevented Parag and Kadambari from moving them to and clustering them within a white cube space.

The TFA is then a counter-archive, a decolonized museum space, where the community takes onus of how they are represented. Parag insists on the value of such a project, mentioning that while it is vital to protect and share with the world Koli histories and knowledge, it is also crucial to ask who gets to legitimize the picture being put out there and disturb the way in which these representations and identities have been conventionally legitimized by outsiders. "Institutions have narratives, but they do not have stories…. Only people who have lived the experience can be storytellers," reaffirms Koli.

In recent years, several initiatives through public-facing cultural activities, like exhibitions, curated heritage walks through Koliwadas, film screenings and panel discussions, have spotlighted Koli history and culture. They have considered it through the prisms of food sustainability, livelihood generation, climate change and marine knowledge, and have actively engaged with Koli community members, prioritizing their personal stories and lived experiences. For instance, the food impact platform The Locavore's Mumbai Koli Project (2025-26), inspired by Sarvnik Kaur's film *Against the Tide* (2023), focused on the Kolis' relationship to the sea through traditional and modern fishing practices. The Worli Koliwada Project, initiated in 2021 by The Heritage Project, a non-profit dedicated to the preservation, promotion and revitalization of cultural heritage, focused on infrastructural improvements and skills programmes for Koli women. In 2021, Bombay61 Studio, Ministry of Mumbai's Magic and The Heritage Lab jointly held a digital photo exhibition called "Through the Eyes of the Kolis: A Reflection on Mumbai's Past, Present and Future," which documented the history of the community and the transformations that have taken place in its relationship with the city and its ecological systems since the 1950s. Conservation education group and the Coastal Conservation Foundation's flagship project, Marine Life of Mumbai (MLOM), has also helped foster dialogue between Koli fishers and the scientific community.

A few things, however, set the TFA apart from other projects of this nature. Firstly, it is an initiative that was born inside the community and is helmed by figures who belong to it. Secondly, Parag and Kadambari are both Mumbai-based artists and the archive sits in close proximity to their own creative practices. Projects that have emerged from their participatory work with the TFA, like the *Koli Bhasha Sangraha*, the first dictionary of Koli language, and *Ek Bagal Mein Chand Hoga Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan*, an artist-book-archive featuring 13 Koli recipes and Parag's drawings.

In fact, the "Shore as Archive" talk was programmed as an event complementing Parag's solo exhibition at TARQ, *Khaari Gaaboli/ Salted Caviar*, which ran from September 10 to October 17. "The TFA is helping me develop my practice, and through my practice, I am speaking about my community," Tandel told us, pointing to the interdependent nature of his artistic and social ventures. *Salted Caviar* brought together different bodies of work that collectively revealed aspects of an artistic practice described by Tandel as non-anthropocentric, minimal, biophilic and "a bare necessity." It is also centred on the Koli philosophy of treating the ocean as a forest, i.e. a delicate and complex ecosystem whose rhythms and patterns must be respected and protected.

The *Salt Shrines* series (2026) of the show comprised sculptures made out of brightly-coloured yarn, wound onto metal armatures to evoke notions of Koli labour, nature worship and votive rituals associated with their annual Bharali Puja. Another series titled *Excavation of Ancestors* (2026) presented sculptures made of Habur stone, a fossiliferous material quarried near Jaisalmer, which was once an ancient seabed. The shapes are results of a fusing of oil pipes with marine life forms, which points to the effects ofpetrochemical greed on our oceans. A third series, *The Vitamin-Sea Archives: Sediments of Intelligence* (2026), was perhaps the most visually arresting segment of the show. It had cyanotypes with AI-generated coral on hand-drawn ink drawings, depicting imaginary underwater scenarios where marine forms share space with deep-sea oil rigs and data centres. The use of cyanotypes was a potent choice, given how the medium is linked to water both in its printing process and through its striking blue colour. The *Worli Koliwada* series (2026) turned to Koli recipes – such as stuffed eggplant with dried tiger prawns, and dried shrimps and raw mango potato curry – sourced from Parag's mother Kamal Tandel and other Koli families. These were overlaid on the imagined undersea worlds (of *Vitamin-Sea*), with food becoming an archaeological site, offering a way into culture and environmental history. In *Estuaries of Waning Sounds: The Koli Dictionary Project* (2025-26), sculptures woven out of fish nets and other found elements were accompanied by handwritten notes. The displays were shaped like Koli words in the form of logographs, script and sound waves. Finally, *Sea of Relations* (2026), a colourful soft floor piece bearing raised shapes of sea creatures, invited viewers to tread on it and thereby share in the tactility of life along the shoreline.

In Tandel's art, the use of Habur stone, seawater, fishnets and shells is significant, since they directly carry memories of the ocean. These careful choices ensure that the works remains materially and conceptually inseparable from the Koli's natural environment and ways of life, and serve as a wonderful accompaniment to the hands-on social and archival work that thrives through the Tandel Fund of Archives.

Sucheta Chakraborty is a Mumbai-based journalist who writes on cinema, dance, books and culture.

The Tandel Fund of Archives can be accessed at:

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