The Kolis of Mumbai at Crossroads: Religion, Business and Urbanisation in Cosmopolitan Bombay Today

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Two recent studies of the Koli goddesses of Bombay have shown that the religious beliefs and practices of one of Bombay’s oldest communities – the Koli - have changed since the late nineteenth century. First, Vicziany and Bapat argued that Sanskritisation has created a large gap between the original worship surrounding the Goddess Mumbadevi and the Kolis. Increasingly, Mumbadevi, the patron Goddess of Bombay, has become absorbed into the practices of the Marathi and Gujarati communities of Bombay. She has been increasingly marginalized by the Kolis. In a second paper, Vicziany and Bapat showed how one of the remaining 23 Koli temples of Bombay – possibly the oldest Koli shrine in that city – is dedicated to the Goddess Khadadevi yet the shrine reflects the syncretic practices of the Kolis that extend to many other Hindu Gods and Goddesses and even non-Hindu religious figures such as the Buddha. From the viewpoint of the wider Bombay community, the shrine to Khadadevi is also patronized by other religious groups including the Parsis. In this way the Khadadevi shrine in Colaba plays a larger role of community integration in a time of increasing communal turbulence. The present paper investigates the nature of Koli belief and worship from a different angle – how has the

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1 Marika Vicziany and Jayant Bapat, *Mumbadevi and the Mother Goddesses in Mumbai*, and *The Khadadevi Temple of Modern Mumbai: Community Harmony and the Koli goddess.*

2 Marika Vicziany and Jayant Bapat, *Mumbadevi and the Mother Goddesses in Mumbai*, and *The Khadadevi Temple of Modern Mumbai: Community Harmony and the Koli goddess.*
urbanization of Bombay affected the Koli? What role have the reservation policies of the Government of India played in changing the religious attachments of the Koli? This case study also represents the second Koli temple that forms part of the Monash Asia Institute project - in contrast to the Khadadevi shrine in Colaba, Bombay’s central business district, this paper investigates the religious life of the Koli who live in a unique village located in Worli, central Bombay. Until the closing down of the cotton mills of Bombay, Worli was internationally known as the centre of India’s textile industry. That industry has now disappeared from the landscape of Worli, where urban land has been converted into middle class shopping malls and apartments. The Koli village of Worli remains, however, as a poignant reminder of the historical evolution of this complex city of almost 20 million people.

The Kolis change tribal names to get jobs

The word Koli means a “fisherman” and includes a number of castes and tribal groups. For instance, the Son-Kolis are concentrated mainly around Mumbai and are almost exclusively involved in fishing. The Mahadev Kolis, a scheduled tribe, are concentrated predominantly in the hinter regions of Maharashtra and are known for their worship of Mahadev (Shiva). Together, these two communities comprise the bulk of the fisher community in Mumbai. The Son-Kolis were the original residents of Mumbai and the Mahadev Kolis were the first Koli migrants to come into contact with them.

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4 The researcher's inquiries into the community and interviews with the villagers revealed two versions of the castes in Worli. According to one version, supported by a thesis by Vijaya Punekar, the Son Kolis were majority original inhabitants of Worli village who began calling themselves Mahadev Kolis for the sake of getting reservation benefits. According to another version the Son Kolis were migrants who came from Raigad district about the 1800s. They were more inclined towards education and felt it beneath them to be called Scheduled Tribes. As things stand today, the Kolis of Worli either call themselves Mahadev Kolis or just Kolis although they have lost their Scheduled Tribe status and are not entitled to any reservation in government jobs. The Son Kolis only admit their caste when specifically asked about it.
A 1959 study by Punekar⁵ found that the Kolis of Worli were predominantly Son-Kolis. However, in the official census of 1930, they had begun to return themselves as Mahadev Kolis, despite the fact that the latter officially belonged to a lower caste⁶. This was due to a government policy of reserving seats in government and public sector jobs for the socially and educationally backward classes. Punekar pointed out that the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes Committee of 1930 had excluded the Son-Kolis from the list of Backward Classes but had included the Mahadev Koli caste. Reservation benefits could only be availed by the latter. Punekar argued that the Son-Kolis chose to call themselves Mahadev Kolis to benefit from the reservation policy.⁷

In 1994, however, the government took this acquired caste status away from the Kolis of Worli following a ruling by the Supreme Court of India in the same year.⁸

The available evidence suggests that in the years between the creation of the list of Scheduled Tribes (1930 census) and the 1994 decision of the Supreme Court of India, the Kolis of Worli accepted the new identity of Mahadev Kolis. Along with that, they began to worship Hindu Gods such as Maruti and Mahadev (Shiva). In doing so, the worship of the original tribal goddess, Golphadevi, got sidelined amongst the Worli Koli community.

Abandoning the Goddess Golphadevi

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⁶ The Mahadev Kolis were notified as a criminal tribe in 1914 under the Criminal Tribes Act, see Ghurye (1969).
⁸ The Supreme Court of India, in a decision handed out in 1994 in the *Kumari Madhuri Fatin v/s Additional Commissioner Tribal Development*, concluded that identity claims must be judged on a legal and ethnological basis. On the basis of this judgement the Scheduled Tribe status claimed by the Son Kolis was taken away since there were several references, including the one by Dr Punekar cited in this paper, which clearly stated that the Kolis in Worli were Son Kolis.
The relationship of the Kolis to Golphadevi used to be very intimate. Every auspicious function, viz. the launch of the boats at every fishing season began only after the *kaul* of the goddess was taken. The *kaul* is a ritual where the priest places two flower buds to the left and right of the image. Whichever bud falls first is then interpreted by the priest as a sign of future good luck or bad luck or an expression of favour or disfavour by the goddess. In the place of a flower bud, at times, a silver marble is used, as in the case of Golphadevi. The Kolis had always believed that all misfortunes were due to the wrath of gods, goddesses or spirits.\(^9\) They further believed that the goddess would tell them the cause of the calamity and provide with a solution too.\(^10\) The Golphadevi temple was one such place where this ritual is still conducted. According to the priest of the temple, the number of people asking for the goddess's *kaul* has dwindled to about ten a week. This figure was as high as 50 a week about a decade ago, the priest said. On the other hand, the number of devotees at the Mahadev or Shiva temple in the village has been steadily increasing. Every day of the week there is a different programme being conducted at this temple. This includes yoga classes and recitation from Hindu scriptures that are attended by about 50 villagers every time. The temple was built in 1904. It is elaborately done up with marble flooring and wooden architecture.

During my interviews with the priest at the Golphadevi temple and with the elders in the village I was told that a very important three day ritual involving the goddess had been stopped some two decades ago. The ritual, conducted every three years, has no name. Each family in the village contributed to the costs for buying goats, rams and cocks. These were sacrificed to please Golphadevi. The last time this was done, the total cost was Rs. 80,000 or more than AUD $2,000 in current prices. So much meat was cooked that the entire village fed on it for three days, during which time *bhagats* (singers) were hired to

\(^9\) See also Vicziany and Bapat who describe Kaul in the shrine of Khadadevi, in the Colaba police station.  
\(^10\) See Punekar (1959)
enhance the potency of a ceremony designed to drive off bad spirits and free the village of evil.

The Golphadevi festival falls on Shakambari Purnima\footnote{The full moon in the Hindu month of Pausha is called Shakambari Purnima in Maharashtra. This year (2008) it fell on January 22, Bhartiya Sanskriti Kosha, ed. Pt Mahadevshastri Joshi, vol 9, page 240, 1993.} every year. The Purnima festival too was celebrated for a full two days but now has been reduced to an overnight celebration. Thus the largest annual festival of Golphadevi is now just a night long,\footnote{This festival falls on the full moon in the Hindu month of Pausha and is called Shakambari Purnima in Maharashtra.} whereas the largest annual festival dedicated to Mahadev is 21 days long.\footnote{This is the Mahashivaratri festival that falls on the fourteenth day of the dark half of the Hindu month of Magha.} The length of these competing festivals, provides one clear indicator of how the worship of Mahadev and overtaken Golphadevi.

The difference in the physical state of the two temples is also a stark indicator of the rise of Mahadev and the fall of Golphadevi. While Golphadevi stands in a partially erected temple, Mahadev is located in a well-sculpted temple made of fine wood and marble. Other signs of the changing worship patterns in the Worli village show that although both young and old continue to respect the tribal goddess their engagement with her is more limited than in the case of Mahadev. Every morning young and middle aged Kolis leaving for jobs outside the village briefly nod as a mark of respect in front of the shrine of Golphadevi.\footnote{Worship at Golphadevi was observed from February 14 to 20, 2008. The author would reach the temple by 6 a.m. and sit inside the temple until about 12 noon. The author would return at 4 p.m. and sit until about 7 p.m. This week was chosen because it fell between the biggest celebration at the temple on January 22 (Shakambari Purnima) and the biggest celebration at the Shiva Temple in the village on March 6, 2008 (Mahashivaratri).} This fleeting acknowledgement contrasts strongly with the large numbers of Kolis who gather at the Mahadev temple for worship every day. Yoga classes, readings from the Hindu religious texts and singing of bhajans are also conducted according to a timetable drawn up months in advance by the temple trustees.\footnote{Personal interview with Hirakant Gurav, the 70-year-old gurav priest, at the Mahadev temple.}

Thus we see that the worship of Golphadevi, the tutelary goddess of the Son
Kolis of Worli, has been sidelined and that she has been replaced to a considerable extent by the worship of Mahadev or Shiva, the tutelary god of the Mahadev Koli community.

In the next section, I consider what events from the 1950s onwards contributed towards distancing the Kolis from Golphadevi.

**Urbanisation and its impact on the Kolis' business**

Up till the 1950s, the Kolis continued with their traditional occupation by fishing with boats fitted with small engines capable of going out to sea for one day. The labourers who worked on these boats were Kolis from the Ratnagiri and Dabhol region and lived with their employers in Worli. The Nakhwa Sangha\(^\textsuperscript{16}\) helped the Kolis financially and materially. In the late 1950s, the Government of India introduced a loan scheme to help Kolis buy trawlers and about 15-20 people from the Worli village also started to build trawlers. The heavier trawlers demanded almost twice the fuel and twice the number of labourers. To encourage the fishermen to buy the bigger boats the government offered a subsidy on the diesel too. The Nakhwa Sangha became the intermediary that allowed the government to pass on the diesel subsidy to the owners of the boats. Based on the anticipated demand from the Kolis, the Sangha bought barrels of diesel from the open market. The diesel was supplied to the Kolis at a lower than market price, which reflected the government subsidy. The scheme did not work smoothly; however, as the central government often delayed reimbursing the Sangha with the result that the Sangha had to carry the financial burden of the government subsidy. In response to this, the Sangha began to pressure the

\(^{16}\) Nakhwa Sangha are cooperative societies formed at all the Koli villages in Maharashtra. They were formed soon after Independence. Nakhwa, technically means the owner of ten boats. However, this is a term now used to denote all fishermen. These cooperatives facilitate the purchase of diesel and ice in bulk. The government passes on the subsidies on oil to the fishermen through these cooperatives. When loan schemes to facilitate purchase of boats, nets etc are announced, individuals apply for assistance to the government through the Nakhwa Sangha of the village.
trawler owners to pay more for the diesel. The Kolis responded to this pressure by keeping their trawlers at sea longer and going to sea further in order to maximise the size of the catch. In the end the government subsidy and the pressures it caused completely changed the fishing cycle and disturbed the marketing chain. The situation was exacerbated because the other Koli villages in and around Mumbai’s coast began to make their own trawlers. Gradually, the catch per boat went down because so many large boats were fishing in the same area.

It also appears that the Koli labourers working the boats cheated on the Koli boat owners. Taking advantage of the fact that they could stay at sea for longer periods, the labourers sold some of the best fish at the ports on the way back to Bombay. On reaching Bombay they reported to the Koli boat owners that the catch had been small. Thus we find that three things hurt the business of the Kolis boat owners and ultimately the industry as a whole: the cost of diesel continued to rise because reimbursement from the government was delayed; the cost of Koli fishing labour increased; and the catch was not enough to compensate for the first two factors.

My interviews with the Kolis of Worli\textsuperscript{17} revealed that within two to three years most of the boat owners had sold their trawlers and started using the smaller boats again. Some went out of the business completely and took up odd jobs. Only a very few were able to withstand the crisis, pay off the loans and other debts and get back on their feet.

The coming of the trawlers also had a negative impact on the marketing of fish. Traditionally only the Koli women sell the fish in the markets of Bombay. When the trawlers began to stay at sea for longer periods the catch became uncertain both in terms of quantity and regular availability. This forced the women to start

\textsuperscript{17} Personal in depth interviews with the villagers, including the trustees of the temples, members of the Nakhwa Sangha and the village heads were conducted at the homes of the individuals between January and May 2008.
buying from the local wholesale market to prevent the loss of regular customers. At about the same time, a wave of new migrants belonging to other communities in Maharashtra entered into the fish marketing business and gradually began to take over this traditional occupation of the Koli women. The new sellers of fish also changed the standard measures used in fish sales. Before the arrival of the migrants fish was bought and sold in batches of 22 fish or 24 fish called one kodi. This was abandoned in favour of a new system of weights. The fisherwomen I interviewed at Worli said that earlier they could count the fish themselves but after the weights were introduced they depended on others to weigh the fish. They began to lose money gradually because it was possible to cheat on the weights. It is also possible that with over fishing, the weight of each fish was declining to the detriment of the Koli.

A further development threatened the livelihood of the Koli fisherwomen – namely the arrival of new male migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s. Unlike the Koli fisherwomen who have sat in a fixed place in the fishing markets of Bombay since the time of the British rule, the stronger male migrants carry the fish on their heads and sell from door to door. As a result, the retail business of the Kolis began to suffer.  

Meanwhile, the infrastructure in and around Mumbai improved, bringing in further competition from outside. Better road and rail transport access and better refrigeration helped fish dealers from far away Orissa and Howrah to send their fish, even three days after a catch, into the Mumbai market. This increased competition for the Kolis of Mumbai in general and the Kolis of Worli in particular – both of whom continued to depend on fishing as a major source of employment and income.

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18 In 2005, the researcher guided Rane, Kavita, for her Masters thesis, *An Observational Study of Communication Skills Involving Fish Retailers in Mumbai*, 2005. The thesis explored the difference in communication methods used by the Koli fisherwomen and the Bihari migrants who sold the fish door-to-door.
Golphadevi's dwindling worship

These events are significant with respect to the worship of Golphadevi. One of the most important functions of Golphadevi was to give kaul to determine the right time to go for fishing, whether the catch would be good and whether the return journey would be safe. With the fishing business so badly affected, the Kolis do not go out to sea as frequently. Moreover, many Koli youth are not interested in the fishing business. About two decades ago, during the pre-dawn hours one could see the Koli women folk loading baskets of fish onto tempos (scooter rickshaws) and taxis and taking them out to sell in the wholesale or retail markets while the men repaired the fishing nets until the afternoon. By the time the women returned, the men would be out at sea. This pattern has clearly changed for the Kolis. Today, the male and female resident of the Koli village at Worli walk out of the village in the morning to regular jobs that are totally unrelated to traditional fishing. These jobs do not require the blessing of Golphadevi.

The Kolis around Mumbai and specifically in Worli are at a crossroads. They have changed their tribal affiliations, their worship and their occupation to adjust to the changing times, increased competition and new technologies. A clear statement that emerged from the in depth interviews was that the younger generation - those who are in their early twenties and locally called the 'neo-graduates' - will not go into the fishing business. They are taking up a wide variety of jobs including computer engineering, accountancy, gym instruction and even working for local orchestras. To these young men and women the traditional worship of Golphadevi is fast losing importance. This worship is being replaced by a tendency to have 'festivals'. They are not particular about the god or goddess at the centre of the festivity as long as there is a celebration and fun.
The most recent challenge of urbanisation that the Kolis in Worli face today is by virtue of the fact that they occupy prime real estate in central Mumbai. During the past two decades, the village has seen a sudden influx of tenants willing to pay good money in cash as rent. The Kolis take a deposit that is returnable at the end of the tenancy and charge a rent. The rent is usually ten percent of the deposit. Today, the tenants far outnumber the Koli residents. The Kolis now complain that their festivities are being hampered because of these 'outsiders'. Usually all Koli festivals begin in the evening and go on with extremely noisy cymbals, drums and loud music often played on loudspeakers till late at night or even early dawn. The tenants have started complaining to the police and demand the enforcement of the 10 p.m. deadline for the end of all celebrations. If the Kolis resist, the tenants will leave, depriving the Kolis of much wanted income. This new source of pressure will soon be reflected in further religious and social changes amongst the Koli.

Conclusion
The relationship of the Kolis with Golphadevi is certainly changing and her worship is at crossroads. Although she has not been totally usurped by the other gods and goddesses as in the case of Mumbadevi, other gods such as Mahadev or Shiva, are contesting her space. The Kolis, at this juncture, appear uncertain about their choice.

Bibliography