VC Special Project

# FOLK CULTURE OF MAHARASHTRA ~ EAST INDIANS OF VASAI

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Design

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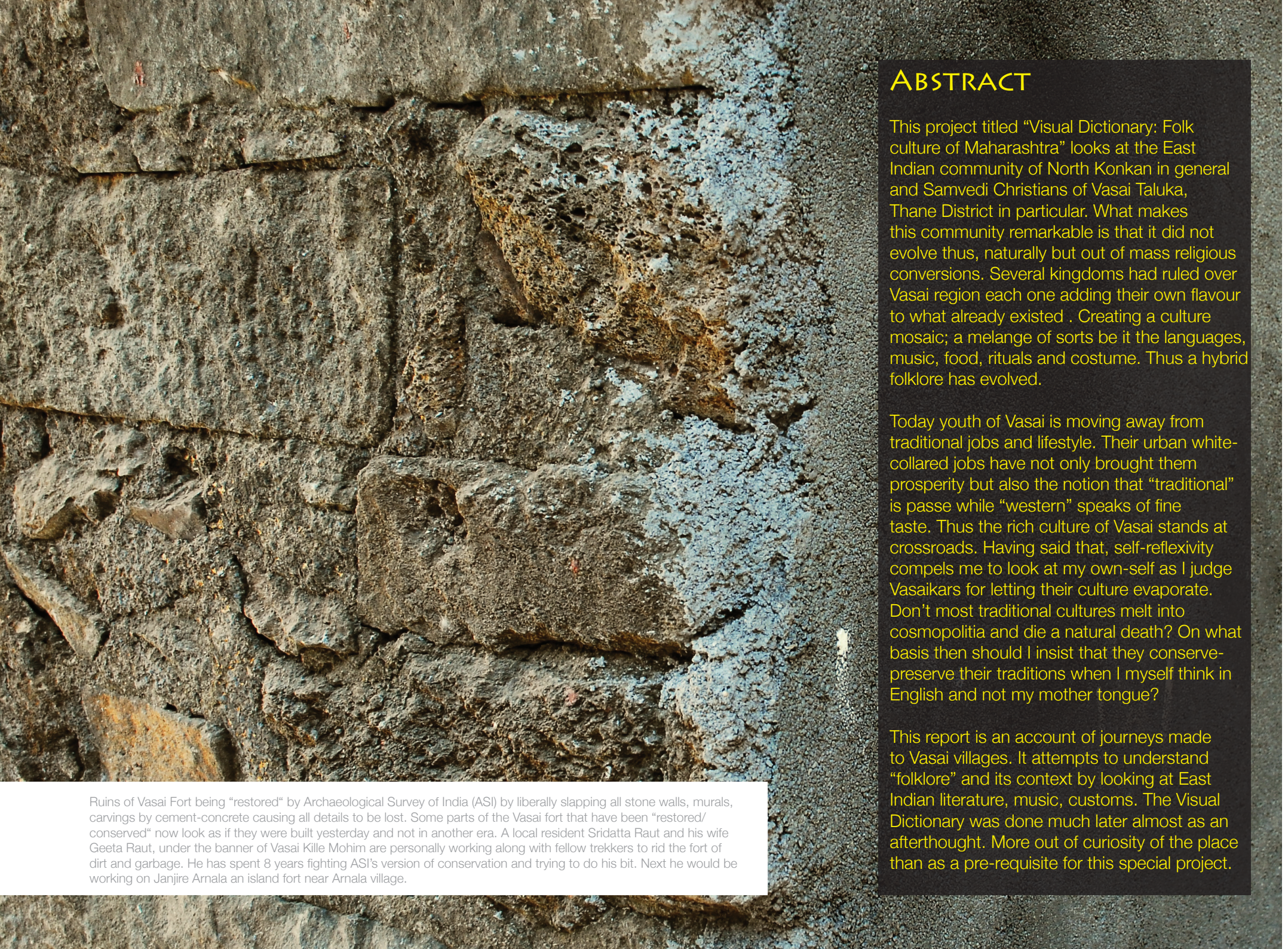

Ruins of Vasai Fort being “restored“ by Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) by liberally slapping all stone walls, murals, carvings by cement-concrete causing all details to be lost. Some parts of the Vasai fort that have been “restored/ conserved“ now look as if they were built yesterday and not in another era. A local resident Sridatta Raut and his wife Geeta Raut, under the banner of Vasai Kille Mohim are personally working along with fellow trekkers to rid the fort of dirt and garbage. He has spent 8 years fighting ASI’s version of conservation and trying to do his bit. Next he would be working on Janjire Arnala an island fort near Arnala village.


# Abstract

This project titled “Visual Dictionary: Folk culture of Maharashtra” looks at the East Indian community of North Konkan in general and Samvedi Christians of Vasai Taluka, Thane District in particular. What makes this community remarkable is that it did not evolve thus, naturally but out of mass religious conversions. Several kingdoms had ruled over Vasai region each one adding their own flavour to what already existed . Creating a culture mosaic; a melange of sorts be it the languages, music, food, rituals and costume. Thus a hybrid folklore has evolved.

Today youth of Vasai is moving away from traditional jobs and lifestyle. Their urban white-collared jobs have not only brought them prosperity but also the notion that “traditional” is passe while “western” speaks of fine taste. Thus the rich culture of Vasai stands at crossroads. Having said that, self-reflexivity compels me to look at my own-self as I judge Vasaikars for letting their culture evaporate. Don’t most traditional cultures melt into cosmopolitia and die a natural death? On what basis then should I insist that they conserve-preserve their traditions when I myself think in English and not my mother tongue?

This report is an account of journeys made to Vasai villages. It attempts to understand “folklore” and its context by looking at East Indian literature, music, customs. The Visual Dictionary was done much later almost as an afterthought. More out of curiosity of the place than as a pre-requisite for this special project.

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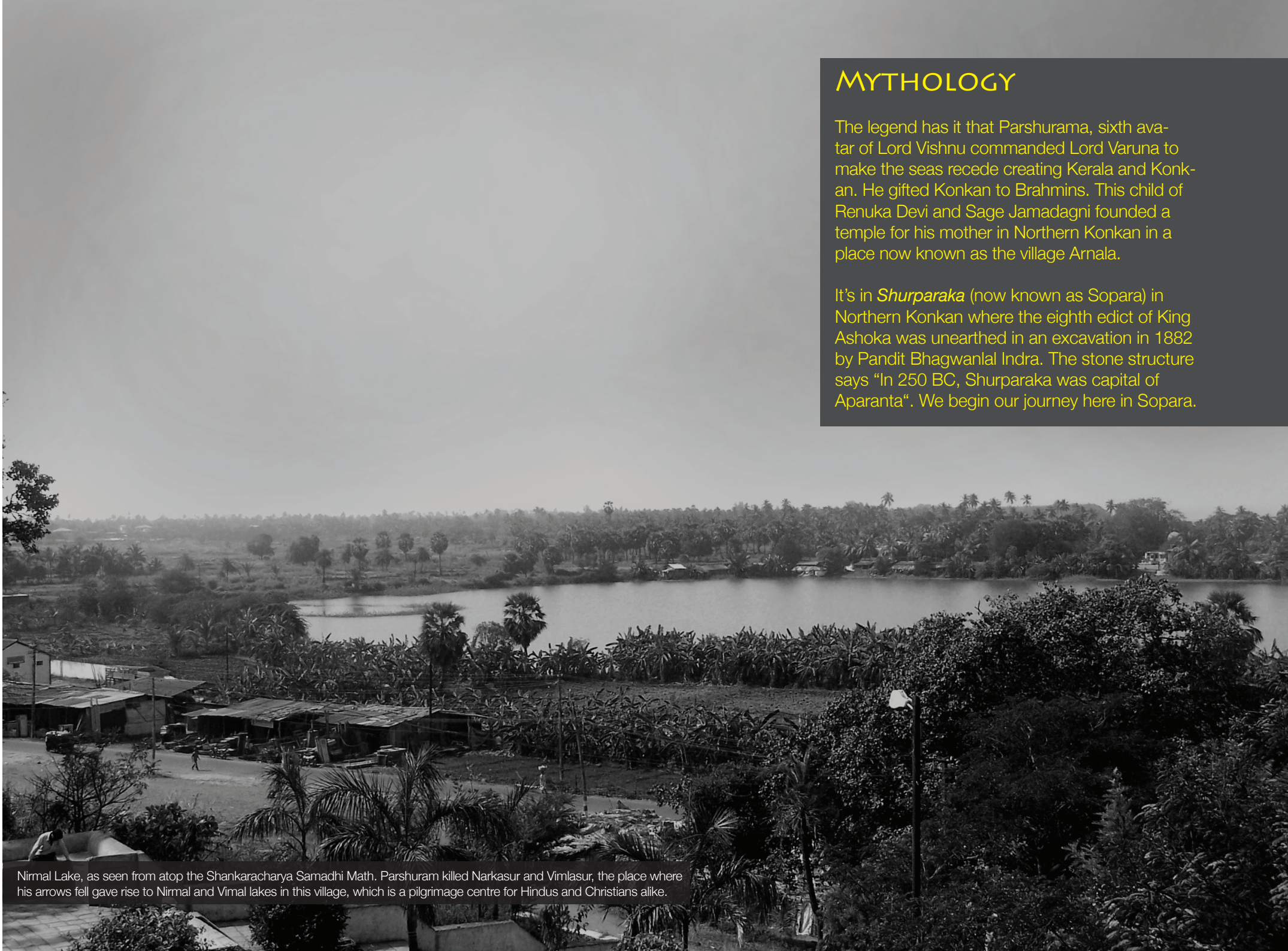
# MY READING

The text, maps and photographs in this section have been reproduced from books called The East Indians by Dr. Elsie W. Baptista as also from the Marathi book called Samvedi Christi Samaj by Father Francis Correia. Few pictures in this section have been clicked by me and indications have been provided for the same wherever applicable.

# Mythology

The legend has it that Parshurama, sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu commanded Lord Varuna to make the seas recede creating Kerala and Konkan. He gifted Konkan to Brahmins. This child of Renuka Devi and Sage Jamadagni founded a temple for his mother in Northern Konkan in a place now known as the village Arnala.

It's in ***Shurparaka*** (now known as Sopara) in Northern Konkan where the eighth edict of King Ashoka was unearthed in an excavation in 1882 by Pandit Bhagwanlal Indra. The stone structure says "In 250 BC, Shurparaka was capital of Aparanta". We begin our journey here in Sopara.



Nirmal Lake, as seen from atop the Shankaracharya Samadhi Math. Parshuram killed Narkasur and Vimlasur, the place where his arrows fell gave rise to Nirmal and Vimal lakes in this village, which is a pilgrimage centre for Hindus and Christians alike.

## SOPARA

*SOUBERA*
*OPHIR*
*SIRIPAKUA*
*SHURPARAKA*

The name Shurparaka evolved from Sanskrit word “surpa“ referring to the shape of the region which resembled the winnowing basket. Kingdoms of Mauryas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Devaagri Yadavs, Sultan of Gujarat reigned here before Portuguese took over the place followed by Marathas and finally British in pre-independence days.

It was one of the first international port towns. Trading of gold, ivory, indigo, cotton, spices, gemstones etc would take place with Greeks, Persians, Venetians, Arabs etc.

## VASAI

*BASSEIN*
*BACAIM*
*BASAI*
*VAS*

As the importance of port towns like Sopara and Kalyan decreased, Vasai became an international port town to reckon with. The Subedar of Gujarat Bahadur Shah had erected a small fortress here which Portuguese fortified into a huge fort. This became their seat of ruling.

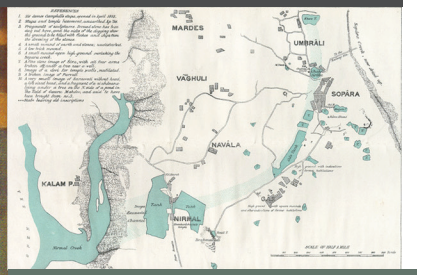
Later when Marathas were told about atrocities of Portuguese specially against Hindus who had refused to convert, Chimajirao Appa besieged the fort. The Maratha rule was short-lived as Bajirao 2 handed over Bassein to the British as part of a treaty.

## MUMBAI

*BOMBAY*
*BOM BAIM*
*MUMBA*
*MAHA AMBA*

Catherine of Braganza, Portugal brought Bombay to Charles 2 as part of her marriage dowry. The British Crown leased it to the East India Company. The British East India Company transferred its headquarters from Surat to Bombay. The city eventually became the headquarters of the Bombay Presidency.

From 1782 onwards, the city was reshaped with large-scale civil engineering projects aimed at merging all the seven islands i.e. Bombay Island, Parel, Mazagaon, Mahim, Colaba, Worli, and Old Woman’s Island into one landmass.




a. Portuguese Bassein Fort when Portuguese had fortified from what Bahadurshah of Gujarat had initially built. Note that it used to be an island fort too.
b. Portuguese Arnala Fort
c. Map of Portuguese conquered area as in 1899

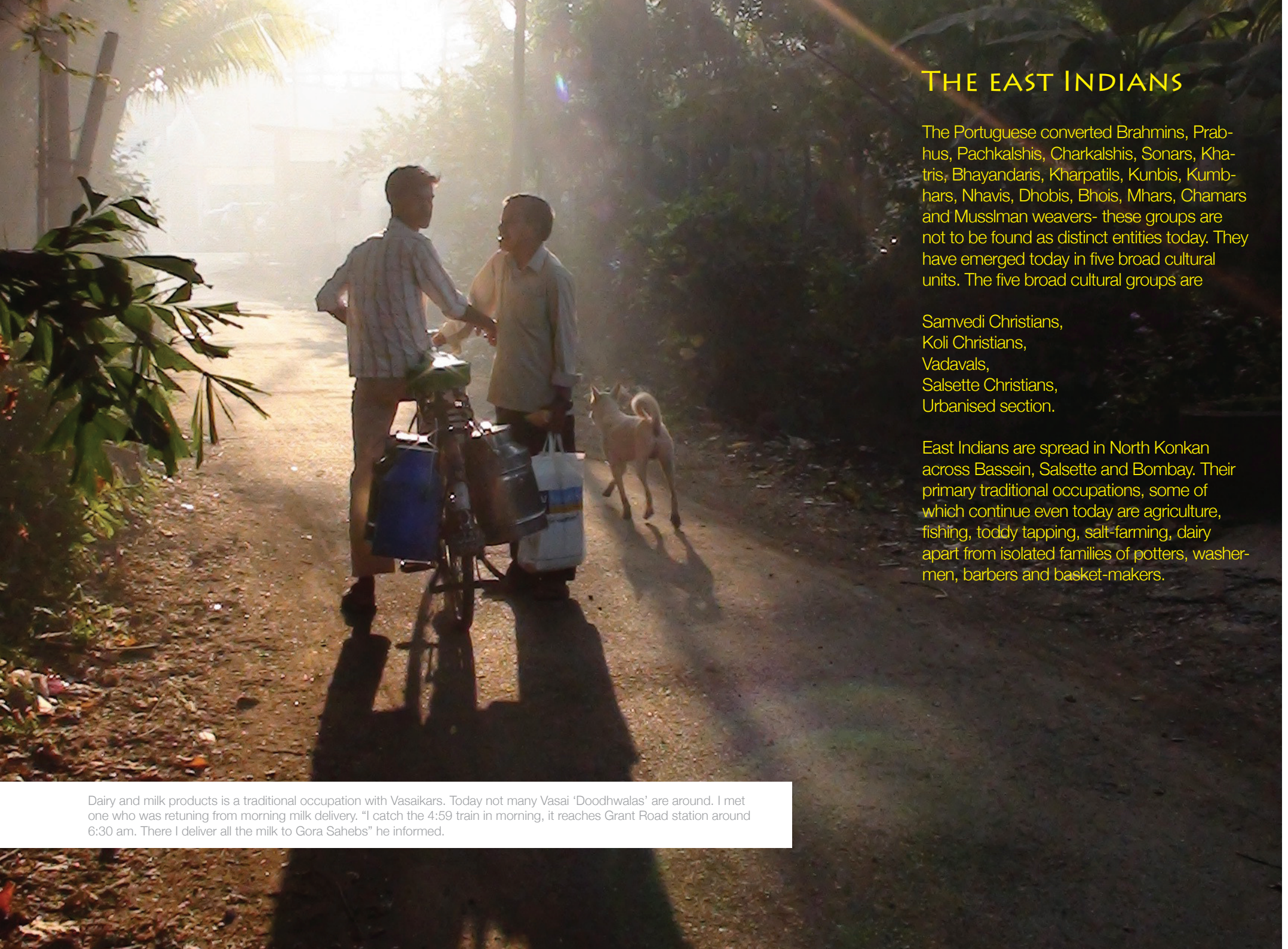
## Speculation

Contrary to the popular notion that Portuguese brought Christianity to North Konkan, the Late Dr. Elsie Baptista believed that Christianity in and around Bombay pre-dated the Portuguese and went back to Apostolic times.

She wrote “Along with the conversion it was also their (Portuguese) policy to extend the influence of their conception of civilization- their ‘Kultur’. Hence, the Portuguese imposed upon their converts, the Portuguese Patronymics, initiated them into European dress, taught them Portuguese language and weaned them to a mode of living and thinking which conformed to their own habits. Uprooted from the traditional rhythm of India’s life, the westernized Indian Christians in the course of time often came to disown their own customs.

Another significant innovation in this direction was the re-formation of the primitive Indian church which was ‘steeped and soaked in Indian love and prejudice, Indian song and architecture, Indian thought and ceremonies’ into a western institution. The language of the church in India which was Syriac was replaced by Latin. The Indian Church was ruled by Eastern Prelates but during Portuguese regime the episcopal honours were reserved for the Portuguese Clergy. The oriental rite of the Indian Church was suppressed as it was considered heretical and the Syriac language of Indian Church was painted as ‘a channel for heresy to flow’. In short, the Church in North Konkan, which was Eastern in form and thought, was garbed in the European fashion. In this process of ‘Europeanizing’ the Indian Christians and ‘Latinizing‘ their Church on the model of the European pattern, all traces of primitive Christianity in North Konkan were obliterated“

This is the Cross of Mauli at Remedy Village. It stands at the corner of a T-junction not very far away from the Vasai Fort. Both Hindu and Christian brethren worship here. In fact, a person staying in the house close to it- a Hindu maintains it and paints it every year for the feast in February in the honour of The Mother or Mauli. He had some reservations about the local parish asserting their ‘claim‘ over this cross. According to him, since it stands on public property and survives on public donations it should belong to public- both Hindu and Christian and not to some parish. He thought it creates unnecessary bad blood. Other side of this story remains to be investigated.



Dairy and milk products is a traditional occupation with Vasaikars. Today not many Vasai ‘Doodhwalas’ are around. I met one who was retuning from morning milk delivery. “I catch the 4:59 train in morning, it reaches Grant Road station around 6:30 am. There I deliver all the milk to Gora Sahebs” he informed.

# The east Indians

The Portuguese converted Brahmins, Prabhus, Pachkalshis, Charkalshis, Sonars, Khatris, Bhayandaris, Kharpatils, Kunbis, Kumbhars, Nhavis, Dhobis, Bhois, Mhars, Chamars and Musslman weavers- these groups are not to be found as distinct entities today. They have emerged today in five broad cultural units. The five broad cultural groups are

Samvedi Christians,
Koli Christians,
Vadavals,
Salsette Christians,
Urbanised section.

East Indians are spread in North Konkan across Bassein, Salsette and Bombay. Their primary traditional occupations, some of which continue even today are agriculture, fishing, toddy tapping, salt-farming, dairy apart from isolated families of potters, washermen, barbers and basket-makers.

# Samvedi Christians

The Samvedi Christians constitute a distinct cultural group in the East Indian community. They are spread over the northern half of Bassein and live together with their Hindu counterparts in large villages in close proximity to the river Vaitarna. The Samvedis, who are one of the sectarian divisions of the Brahmin group, evidently migrated to Sopara between 700 BC to 300 BC, for by the middle of 3rd century BC, as unfolded by the famous edict of Ashoka found in Sopara, the western coast had been completely Aryanized.

Though unanimous in claiming their lineage from the early Aryan settlers, neither Samvedi Christians nor Hindus seem to possess any written record of their early history.

Today the Samvedi Christians as well as Hindus are mainly engaged in agriculture. According to the Samvedis themselves, when they were superseded by the Yajurvedi Brahmins, it was no longer possible for them to earn a livelihood as ministers. Hence they turned their attention to agriculture. Centuries of labour in open fields has had its impact on the physiognomy and complexion of the Samvedi men and women. However, there are still among them individuals who possess what are generally considered Aryan characteristics.

There is no difference between Samvedi Christians and their Hindu caste fellows except that since their conversion the Portuguese have introduced certain changes in dress and diet which have divided them into two groups. In marriage the Hindus have retained the 'gotra' system consisting of sixteen 'gotras' or family stock and four sub-divisions namely Naik (leader), Vaghe (Priest), Joshi (astrologer), and Bhatare (cook). Among Christians, however the introduction of Portuguese Patronymics interfered with this ancient Brahmanic practice. On the other hand the Christians have retained much of their pre- Christian traditions. As such they form a distinct and unique cultural entity in the larger East Indian Community.

1. Elderly Samvedi Christian woman wearing traditional attire called LAL LUGDA. This attire is dying out and seen only in older generation. Samvedi Brahmin women wear any colour but red.
2. Women sing songs and fry "TALAN/ FUGE" which will be served to guests visiting the house where wedding is being held, it will be distributed to all the villagers as well.
3. Vows being exchanged between Macvin ad Rupali of Wagholi at the Mardes church, the wedding always happens in the bride's Parish. East Indian weddings these days happen on Saturday & Sunday and are a spectacle with wedding band playing, lots of dancing and merry making.
4. Inside the Nirmal church, Nirmal with its church and temple dedicated to Shankaracharya is a holy centre for both Hindus as well as Christians and finds a mention in Skanda Purana.

# Koli Christians

The Koli Christians are another distinct cultural unit in the East Indian Community. With few exceptions they are exclusively engaged in the fishing trade. Their sea-faring activities brought many of them in close touch with Portuguese which gave the missionaries an opportunity to spread Christianity among them. The Kolis, both Hindu and Christian, live together in little colonies called 'Kolivada'. Their hamlets are situated along the western littoral and at the entrances to inland creeks.

The early history of the Kolis, states that they were a migratory tribe (or tribes) who spread out from Balaghat and Mahadev Hills till they reached the western shores. The name Kolaba given to an extensive area on the western mainland was in consequence of a large settlement of Kolis, KOLABA being a derivation go KOLA-BHAT or the Koli Estate. But from the nomenclature of some localities in the city which bear evidence either of their settlements or their occupation, it may safely be presumed that they were fairly numerous in Bombay before the advent of the Portuguese. Today the Kolis are not so numerous in the city, but are found in greater numbers in the rural areas having been driven northwards owing to the expansion of the city and harbour.

The Koli Christians live happily and contentedly with their Hindu caste fellows. Unlike the other Christian groups conversion to Christianity has not resulted in change in dress and food among the Christian Kolis to differentiate them from their Hindu brethren.

The social life of Koli Christians in every 'Koliwada' is controlled by a 'jamat'. The introduction of a uniform system of administration of justice by the British deprived the 'jamat' of many of its ancient right to handle criminal offences or to adjudicate on them. Today the 'jamat' has lost much of its authority, but it still has a hold on the people. The 'jamat' does not outcast an erring individual, but the people themselves voluntarily and spontaneously treat him as one unwanted by the group.

Koli Christians are largely isolated from the East Indian community.

5. While drying Bombil, this Koli Christian woman told me about what their daily routine is like. Then she invited me for the community weddings in February. "Normally the men folk are away at the sea, so where is the time to socialize? Thus having most weddings at this time helps getting everybody together at one time.
6. Anchors for sale at Arnala village.
7. Fishing baskets and blue coloured fishing net weights. These weights hold the net down in turbulent sea. Post wear and tear they are broken open and used as containers / dust bins.

# VADAVALS

The Vadavals form the third cultural group. Along with their Hindu counterparts they are spread mostly over the southern half of Bassein, with only a few scattered families in the northern half. They live in villages made up of 'Vadis'. The Vadavals are Pachkalshis or Somvanshi Kshatriyas who believe that they were originally a warrior class. But owing to political revolutions that transferred the supreme power from the Hindus to the Mahomedans and from Mahomedans to the Portuguese, they were forced to take up agriculture and carpentry. The agricultural section settled in bassein and called themselves Vadavals, or the managers of 'Vadis' and the other group remained in Salsette and were known as Sutars.

# SALSETTE CHRISTIANS

Strictly speaking, it must be admitted, that there is no group in the community designated 'Salsette Christians'. The name 'Portuguese' or 'Salsette' Christian was given by the Europeans to the Christians of the 'upper classes' in contradiction to the 'lower classes' who had retained their caste designations. The term 'upper classes', it must be distinctly stated did not carry with it any notion of wealth or birth. It merely meant a group of converts who, almost from the beginning of the Portuguese rule, emerged as a 'casteless' Christian group having been highly influenced by the Portuguese culture and civilization. They were educated in Portuguese and adopted Portuguese as their mother tongue.

The Salsette Christians assert that they are largely composed of Prabhus, Palshikar Brahmins, Pachkalshis, Khatris and Sonars. The skilled boat-builders and wood-carvers of the group are undoubtedly representatives of the Sutar Pachkalshis now found in Salsette and Bassein. The weavers of Khatriali or K-villa in Thana, who till about fifty years ago were engaged in weaving the finest silk fabrics and gold and silver lace, on the other hand, definitely suggest Khatri converts. And Sonars who claim to belong to the Daivadnya Brahmi group are to be found in and around Papri. The Prabhus, Palshikar Brahmins, Pachkalshis etc. however are not distinct entities. They have lost their 'separateness' and have merged into a single cultural and endogamous group.

# URBANIZED SECTION

The urbanized East Indians constitute the apex in the social hierarchy of the community. Prior to their coming under the influence of British administrators and the Jesuits of the Propaganda Fide, they formed part and parcel of the 'Salsette Christians'. While the mission of Portuguese missionaries was to convert and initiate the neophytes into Portuguese culture and civilization as an external symbol of their Christian faith, the policy of the Jesuits of the Propaganda Fide was to intellectualize the Indian Christians and internationalize their outlook of life in accordance with the social philosophy of Christianity by imparting to them the highest form of education prevalent in Christian Europe. This Christian education not only westernized the Indian Christians externally but also internally, that is to say not only their mode of living but their mode of thinking. Since the British found missionary schools and colleges useful institutions for recruiting personnel to serve in the administrative departments of the Government, the Urban East Indians found it expedient to assimilate the culture of the rulers to the maximum limit.

A Salsette Christian woman

# FOLK STORIES/ LITERATURE/ SONGS

**How Bassein was acquired.**
When the Portuguese arrived and wished to settle at Bassein, they resorted to a ruse. They begged of the King for a present of land “as much as a cow-hide”. Amused with the novelty of this request, the Sovereign granted them their modest petition and permitted them to choose a spot.

The Portuguese then cut the hide into thin stripes and with these proceeded to measure the ground chosen with the result that the surface now occupied by the Bassein Fort. The Raja was so struck with the ingenuity of the Firangis that he made over to the entire district of Bassein.

**Why St. Joseph was chosen by Our Lady as her Spouse.**
Because of her vow of virginity. Our Lady had made up her mind never to marry. But when pressed by her parents and relatives she did not wish to displease them. She, however, asked for one favor and that was the choice should be with her. They agreed. “Then let them repair to the Temple who seek my hand and assemble in the house of the Lord three days hence”, said Our Lady. “I will come and make my choice”.

On the day appointed by Our Lady, going to the Temple handed each aspirant a rod of dry wood saying, “Whomsoever’s rod shall put forth leaves and blossom, him will I marry.” In that instant the rod in St. Joseph’s hand sprouted and blossomed !

**Why the souls from Purgatory now do not visit their relatives.**
The atmas (souls) from Purgatory were permitted by God to visit their kinsfolk once a year and to spend the day- mid-day to mid-day on earth. An old lady whose only son had died, whom she loved dearly, was very happy to see him back. She, however, would not let him go back when the time came and closed him under azamp, I.e a large basket.

On the souls return, when the roll was taken and his absence noted the matter was reported to God, who said, “Well, this means that we shall have to cancel this privilege in future” – and from that time the souls have lost this holiday.

**A St. Francis Tradition**
There is a tradition that St. Francis Xavier on landing at Utan was met with resistance by it’s inhabitants and force to leave the village. When he came to the shore, there was no vessel, so he spread his handkerchief on the waters, blessed the element and the floating piece of cloth, sat on it and was conveyed across the arm of sea to Bassein.

**About a Hidden Treasure**
In the parish of Our Lady within a quarter of a mile from the Church, may be seen (unless things have changed now) the foundations over-grown with the Banyan and papal of what must have been a Portuguese mansion.

Here tradition says, there is a hidden treasure guarded by a headless Peepal, a Negro. Once a year a on a moonless night at twelve o'clock the treasure-trove comes to the surface of the earth and glitters. If you can know the day, and what is more, are bold enough to undertake the journey alone to the spot, you will be rich; for you are permitted to exchange your silver and copper coins for an equal number of gold coins The silver and copper which you throw into the trove immediately turns into gold.

**The Water Nymph**

Hel-li, an evil spirit, in the form of a young woman, lives in lonely wells and tanks, comes out on certain days at mid-day to play on the swing of which amusement she is very fond. Ia a Banyan tree is close by she prefers its hanging roots from which to swing leaving her long hair disheveled. (On this account a grown up girl leaving her hair loose is reproached as a Hel-li.)

This spirit is said to take temporary possession of young people, who may encounter her whilst swinging making them boisterous for a time.

**A Tale of Elf**

On the other hand Zoting or Gera, who haunts the outskirts of villages and marshy places, is a mischievous spirit who appearing in the form of a man but with the feet pointing backwards, takes pleasure in annoying lonely travelers, or in frightening a group of them by assuming fantastic shapes, and with this intent he is very officious and will offer his services to anyone that is stranded.

One evening a parish priest of was found waiting to be ferried across the creek that lay between him and his parish. The boat lay anchored, but there was no sign of the boatman. Darkness was gathering fast, and the poor priest was at his wit's end. Whilst in this dilemma, he was addressed by some one whose voice seemed familiar:-

"What are you doing here Father ?"
"I am waiting to be conveyed across"
"The boatman is gone home, Father, and will not return till morning."
"I see" returned the priest, " So I had best wade through, while the tide is yet low, eh ?"
"Why all that trouble, Father ? I'll take you across on my back."
"It's very kind of you" said the unsuspecting Vicar, and allowed himself to be carried.

A few minutes later the Father was puzzled. Somehow, it seemed that all was not well, that instead of being across, the movement seemed to be at right angles to the ferry. Perhaps he thought, he was mistaken, and asked how far the shore lay.
"Oh, its quite near, don't worry"- but the tone had perceptibly changed.

The Father was quick to note the change but said nothing. He thought for a while, drew his conclusion and began to pray.
"What are you murmuring to yourself ? Stop it."
Heedless, the priest went on with his prayers.
"Stop that ghun-ghun (murmur) of your, I say again."
If any doubt had lingered in the priest's mind, it had vanished now. And the prayer were mingled with many a sigh, not unmixed with self-reproach for being so easily taken in.
"You won't stop ?"

Next moment the poor priest found himself buried breast-deep in the bog !- where he remained until rescued next morning.

**An Uncanny Beast**

Bhaloo, a famous animal lives in caverns, and has the power of destroying whole villages by its howling. It seldom howls, but when it does howl over against a village, flames leap forth and coals of fire fall from its mouth and the doom of that village is sealed, some epidemic then sweeps the population, desolation sets in and the houses fall into ruin (The lost villages of Magathan and Old Gorai, and the remnants of Dahisar and Kashi, are some instances in point)

No greater malediction can befall a family than to be cursed (by a woman, of course) with this uncanny beast: "Tuje ghattanavar bhaloo bhunkel, ani tuja sagla sattia nas hoil." On the ruined foundations of your house, shall the bhaloo howl, and your destruction will be complete.

**The Ingenious Fox**

One day a farmer was seated near his well apparently in deep thought.
"Why are you so sad, Thomas Fari ?" asked the fox.
"I am puzzled about my mare, Sir Fox" replied the farmer.
"How?"
"You know my neighbor Jamboo Ghonsal ?"

"Perfectly"
"Well you see, my mare and his cow were friends and were always together. I never dreamt, when her time came, would come home with a calf !"
"I see" mused the fox " and I suppose the cow has the colt, is it ?
"Yes, Sir Fox, that is the position which is puzzling me."
"A great puzzle it is, no doubt, and complicated too. What are you going to do ?"
"Why ? Nothing"
"Farmer Thomas Fari, you are a simpleton. Take the case to court…."
"But, Sir Fox… "
"Take the case to the court, and summon me as you witness."

Poor Thomas Fari was puzzled more than ever. He consulted his friends who shook their heads, "Was Thomas mad to listen to the wily fox ?" said one. " Who could stand against jamboo Ghonsal ? or gainsay his influence ?" said another. "What proof had he against the rich man and how dare he take the Patel to court ? said the third.
Then . . . "You must be losing your senses, Thomas Fari" they all said in a chorus and left the farmer convinced of the fool-hardy advice of the fox.

Next day Mr. Fox appeared for his drink at the well and inquired of Thomas how matters stood.
"I don't think I'll proceed" replied the farmer.
"Senor Fari, Take my advice and file your complaint. Don't waste time."
So the suit was filed.

Never was there a case which drew public attention as this one, for apart from the novelty of the case and the person charged, the enter of attraction was the fox. On the day of hearing, therefore, the whole village and even the neighboring village went to watch the proceedings.

Jamboo Ghonsal and his witnesses were examined, Farmer Thomas went through the ritual, and then came the turnoff his witness. As his name was called, there was a general movement of people, but the fox was nowhere to be seen.

The somebody said he had seen Mama (Uncle i.e the fox), asleep at the court-yard. And there indeed was the fox found fast asleep. With difficulty he was awakened, brought in and placed in the dock. Even here he began to doze and yawn. Poor Thomas Fari felt his case was lost for he read displeasure in the face of the Judge.

A sharp word from the court brought the fox to his senses and still yawning, he thus began:

"Sir, pray excuse my dozing and yawning, but you see, your Honour, last night the sea was on fire and was burning, and I had gone to extinguish it." There was laughter in the court.

"What ! Are you mad ? How can the sea catch fire ?" came sternly from the judge.
The face of the sly fox beamed with joy, for he precisely waiting for a question like this from the Judge, and prompt was his reply, which was also his question:

"Then Sarkar," said, the fox with a twinkle in his eyes, " how can a ow give birth to a colt ?"
"What wisdom !" said the Judge and garlanded the fox, while shouts of "Shabas" "Well Done, Uncle, well done" rent the court premises.

Why the Water-Melon has disappeared from Bandra
The Water-melon grew luxuriantly in Bandra, and was quite a rival to its Alibaug and Pen cousins. But the time came when it disappeared from the very face of Bandra.

The story goes that the farmers, in the anxiety to 'watch' the malas (farm-yards) in the season, forgot to pray. And Priest of St.. Andrew's Church saw with concern that his parishioners were keeping away from Sunday Mass and were thus neglecting to hear the Word of God. He remonstrated, he persuaded, but his was a voice in the wilderness. Finding his fatherly admonitions falling on deaf ears, he begged of them with fear in his eyes not to force him to do anything that would injure their interest, but even this threat was taken no notice of.

Then much against his will, he ordered a water-melon to be brought to church and . . . Maldisao dilam kalagravar. . . he cursed the water melon "Never shall the like of you grow in Bandra anymore."
Hence no water-melons grow in Bandra, or for that matter in Salsette or Bassein.

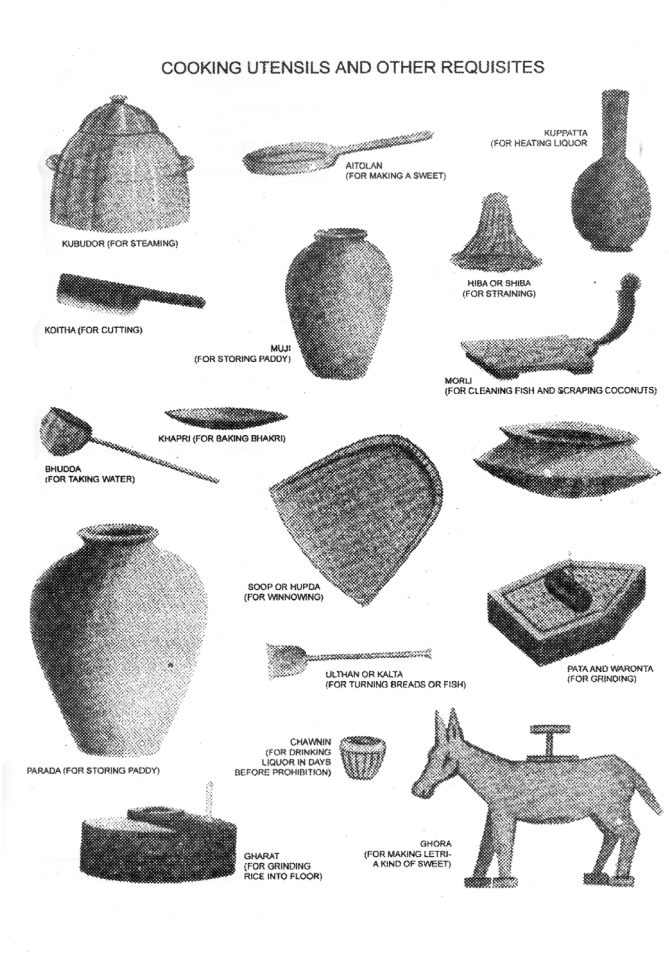
A Saying about the City of Bassein
In connection with siege of Bassein by the Marathas and the gallant defence of the doomed

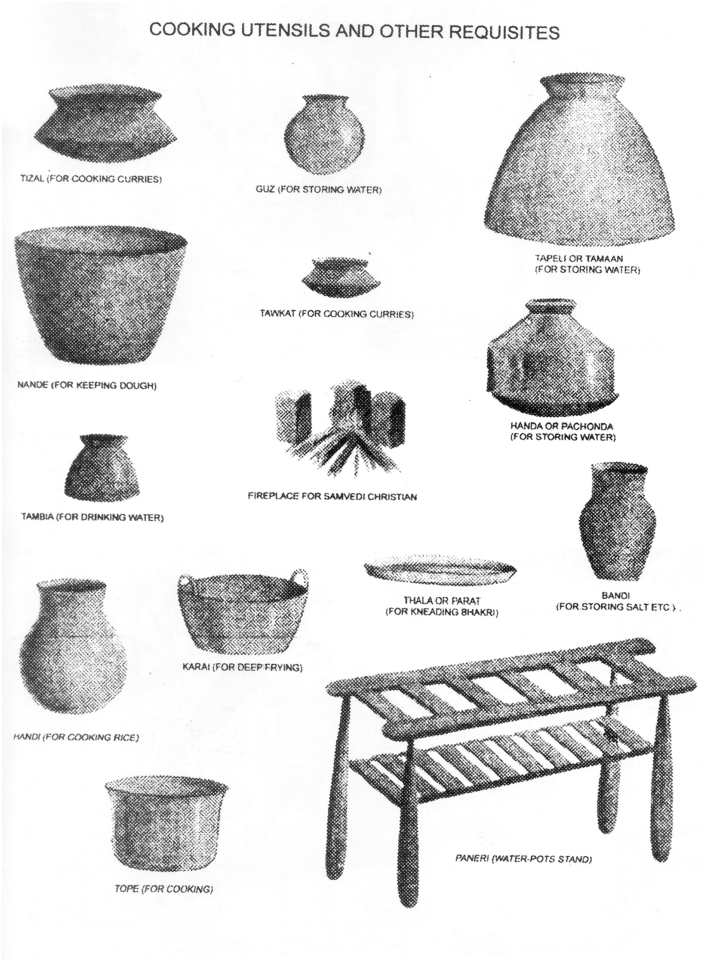
city by the Portuguese garrison. There is a saying (which is current also among the Hindus) that seems to point to an appalling loss of life on the side of the besiegers and evidently to record the 'Phyrric' nature of their victory" "Naw Lakh bangri phutli" . . . Nine Lakh bangles broke.

Incidentally, it must be mentioned here that it was a bangri-walla from Marol, (near Andheri) who acted as a spy and disclosed to the Maratha General the plight of the defenders. It is said that the ladies of Bassein were particularly fond of bangles and consequently the pedlars of these dainty wares were, so to speak, a privileged class, and were allowed to enter the city without let or hindrance. The bangri-walla ranks next to the village barber in cunning and shrewdness and here he was not long before he took advantage of the freedom that was his. He secretly conveyed information to the Peshawa's brother, commanding the Maratha forces, who had already come to the end of his tether and was planning to raise the siege and retire to Poona.

The General acted upon the information and pressed the siege with more vigour, until the sick and famished garrison was compelled to capitulate.
Thus was fair bassein lost. Woman's vanity, was once again the cause of loss.

**Why the banana blossoms once only.**
Once Our Lady was on a long journey (the reference evidently is to Our Lady's visit to St.. Elizabeth after the Annunciation, or what is more probably, to her return journey after the sojourn with her cousin) hungry, tired and foot-sore, she sought a shady spot near a place where grew the banana and the date-palm, side by side. Whilst resting she beheld the banana tree bending with the weight of a large bunch (longer) of plantains. This alcove or grove was on the way-side, that is to say, on God's earth, and no-man's land. Otherwise, Our Lady would never attempt without permission to do what she presently attempted. She rose, stepped to the inviting tree and was about to put her hand to the ripe fruit when the treacherous tree straightening itself grew higher and was thus out of reach. At this moment the date-tree seeing the perfidy of the banana tree, lowered itself down to Our Lady's height that she may reach her dainty hand to the tiny but luscious fruit, ate it and satisfied her hunger.
So spontaneous as act of charity could not



go un-rewarded. Our Lady thanked the date-palm for the delicacy of her though, no less for her gracious deed which thenceforth was to sweeten the mouth on happy and auspicious occasions.

While to the banana tree she said " Henceforth your fruit shall be your end. Therefore you shall blossom and bear fruit only once and then . . . die" So the plantain tree yields fruit one once and is then cut down.

**An Episode in the Life of the Baptist**

Our Lady dwelt with her cousin, Elizabeth until after the birth of St.. John and ministered to her. Mother-like St.. Elizabeth, expected Our Lady to kiss the new-born, but her expectation was not fulfilled, for Our Lady did not kiss the baby. St.. Elizabeth, lady-like said not a word, nor did she show any sign of disappointment, but Our Lady read the mind of her kinswoman and thus addressed her:

"Cousin, Elizabeth thou art troubled (sad) because I gave no kiss the baby, but when thou knowest the reason, thou wilt understand and rejoice.

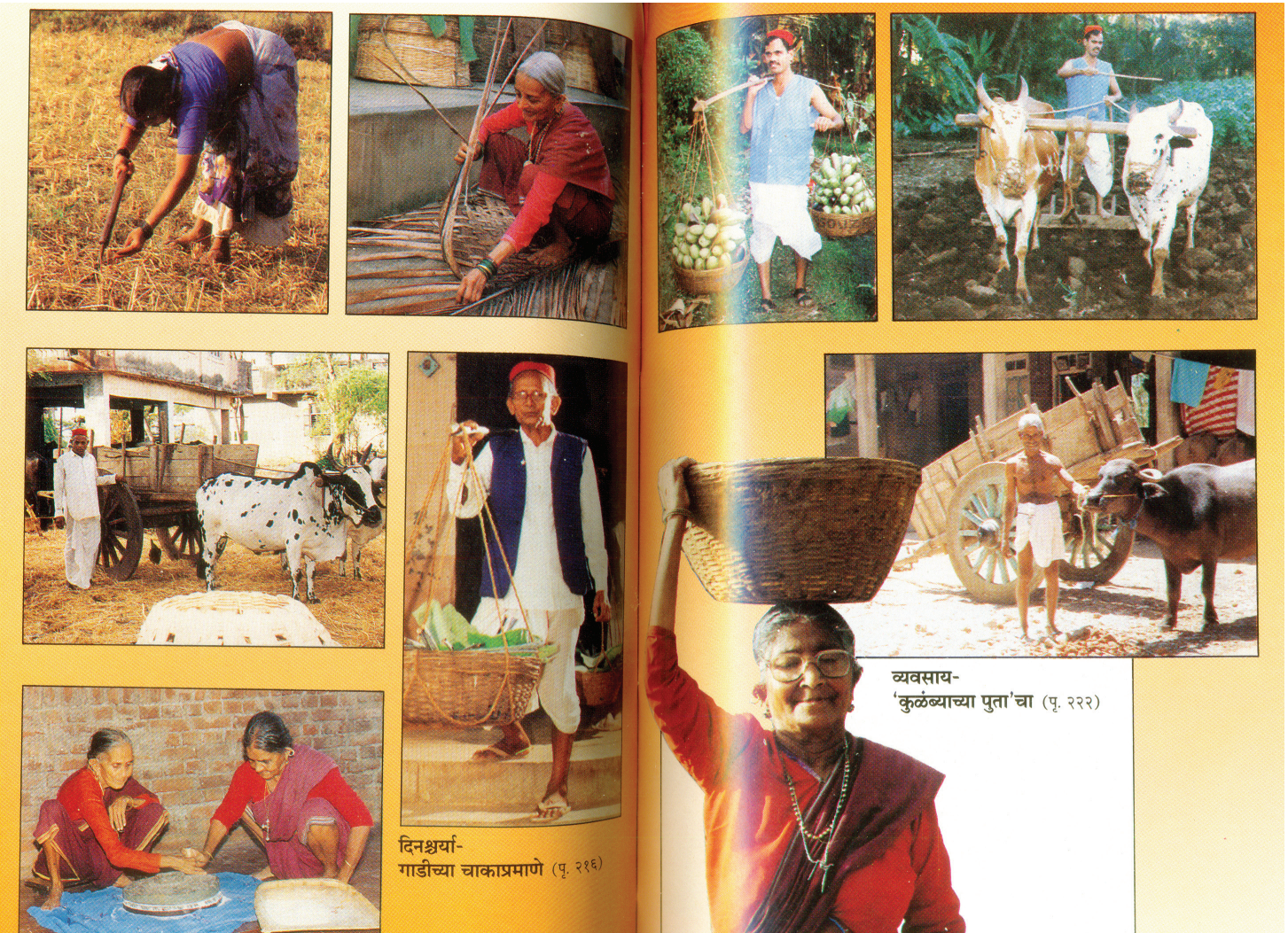
"My lips shall not touch John's baby face until that which is done unto me shall come to pass, then, when I have imprinted a mother's first kiss on the Fair Countenance of the Saviour of mankind, my sanctified lips shall touch John's prophetic brow."

"So be it, Blessed Mother of my Lord," said St.. Elizabeth.

Hence the boy John is represented, in art, with the child Jesus and His Blessed Mother, but not with St.. Elizabeth, his own mother.

Other Sayings

1. If the hen after taking sand or mud bath should come into the house to shake off the dust. It is believed that a visitor is due today.
2. If the visitor is due at nightfall, the sign is different, the housewife or the person baking appas or chapaties is the first to notice it. In this case the plate called khapri, shows more than once tiny sparks of fire in line, a little below the rim, outside. The one who notices it usually says "Khapri hansteya, kon pauna yetya ?" I.e "the khapri is laughing, who is the guest that is coming ?"
3. The crow is considered bird of ill omen. His persistent crowing in the peculiar raucous manner near the house is a sign that all is



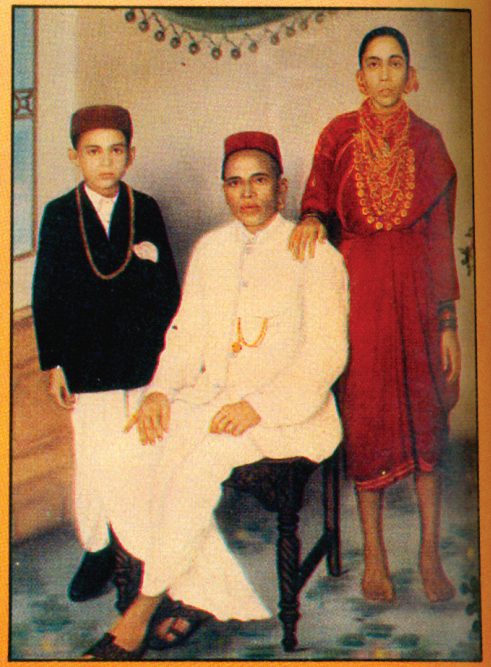
not well. Usually “a messenger arrives with news of a relative’s death.”

4. If a number of crows should perch on trees or house tops and begin their cawing, then a body leave still cawing, fly a certain distance, come back, and then repeat the procedure several times, it is a sign that the village will soon be visited by a pestilence.
5. Should a person going on business find a cat cross his path from right to left, he will stop short and wait until another passer-by goes past him. He will then continue his journey as the bad luck, which might have befallen him has been counteracted by the passer-by
6. The hoot-hooti: “Who-did it”, a bird usually hard during the night and particularly in hot season, is considered unlucky. A pinch of salt thrown into the fire counteracts the evil.
7. The male cobra encountering a woman in delicate health turns blind. To regain his sight he lives in hiding about the neighborhood until the baby is born and bathed, when he come out to drink or bathe in the water in which the baby has been washed and thus regains his sight—and we suppose runs for his life for all his worth !
8. The honey –comb, which we should go far to seek, is considered to bring ill-luck, if the bees take into their heads to build their hive in a dwelling place. A fire is prepared on the ground immediately below the hive to drive the bees away.
9. Bhut or the devil is supposed to be haunting oarts, gardens, deserted habitations and the wilds from sunset to first cock crow; so that no driver of vegetable carts (though these move in a body caravan-fashion) will ever think of yoking his bullocks till the crowing of the cock has sent the ancient adversary to the nether world.
10. Incidentally the rowing of the cock is interpreted as: Sao Pedro negar: St.. Peter denied the Lord !
11. Rocking an empty cradle gives baby a stomach ache.
12. The spider is always associated with good luck. When it is found crawling on one’s shoulder or arm he or she is in for money.
13. Sweepings from the house, especially from the kitchen, must not be thrown out at night, but allowed to remain in a corner until the morning. If they are thrown out the prosperity of the house will suffer.
14. When a person sneezes, or whilst drinking the liquid should enter the wind-pipe resulting on a choking sensation, it is a sign that some one is thinking of him.
15. Giving fire from the chula to your neighbor at night time is considered bad luck to the giver.
16. Eggs may not be set when the tide is in, or when the moon is full, as they are likely to be spoilt.
17. Among the many small points for good behavior the young bride carries from her mother’s home, the first is that she must place her right foot on the first step when entering her husband’s house the first time.
18. Our Lady of the Mount has seven sisters each of whom she visit once a year.
19. If a person drinks water at sun-down, that is, while the sun is sinking below the horizon, he deprives his relatives who may be in

गेली ती लाल टोपी आणि
गेले ते लाल लुगडे (पृ. १८८-१८९)

Pictures from the Marathi book Samvedi Christi Samaj by Father Francis Chorea.

**चार पिढ्यांचे खानदान**
(पृ. ३३८)

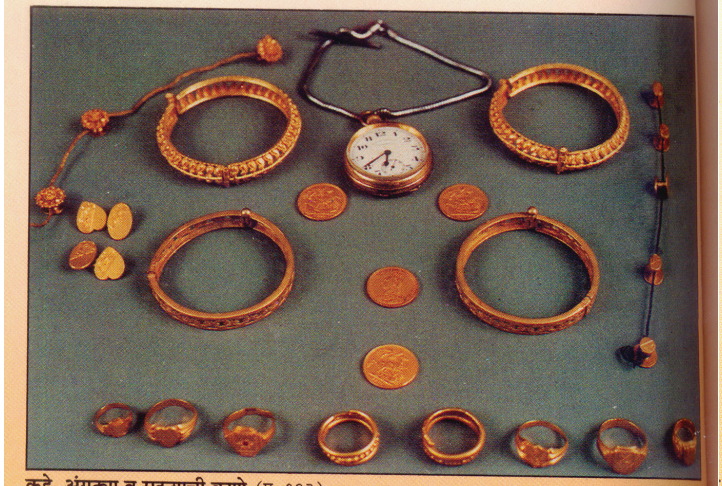


purgatory of their quota of water for that day (the reference is that every mortification in their behalf helps the souls)

20. The broom, especially the reed one, mush not be kept vertically (standing) in a corner of the house, but must be left flat on the house, but must be left flat on the floor after use, otherwise it creates a friction in the home and is also a sure source of quarrel with the neighbors.
21. On the other hand a vertically placed broom has the power of sending away in haste a boring or an unwelcome visitor, provided the “zaroo” is intentionally so placed, that is in the name of the wearisome person.
22. Married persons and even unmarried ones must avoid eating the twin banana (plantains stuck together) lest twins be their portion.
23. An old discarded sandal, slipper or shoe tied to a fruit bearing tree keeps away the evil eye.
24. When the lizard chuckles the housewife is heard to say: “Sital hov maule” “tender calm Mother Mary”
25. The rearing of pigeons is considered unlucky usually the bread-winner of the family dies.
26. After death the soul appears before the judgment seat on the third day, until which time the body lies in the grave intact. After the soul has been judges, the earth begins its work- the tip of the nose being the first organ of attack.



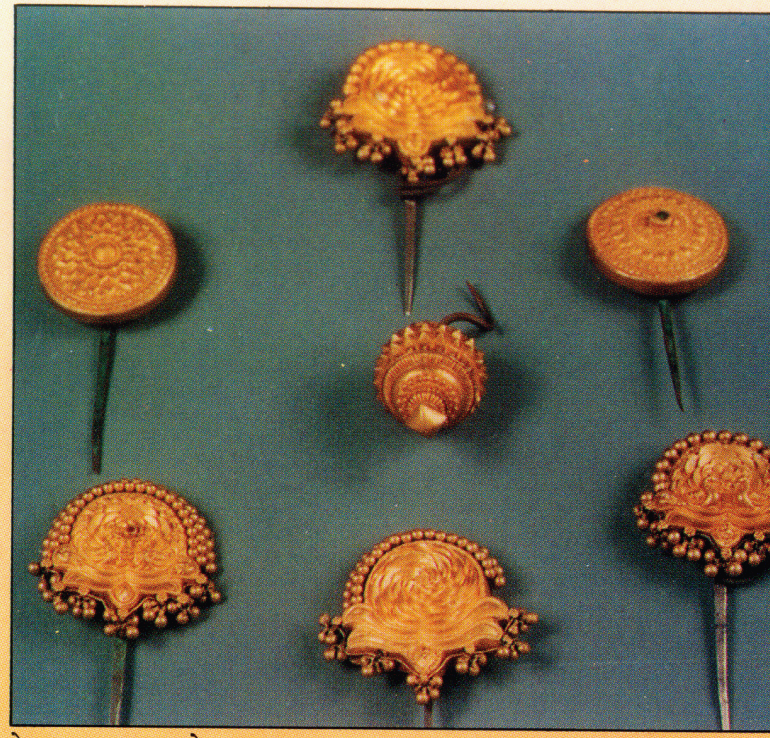




कडे, अंगठ्या व सदऱ्याची बटणे (पृ. १९३)

पुतळ्यांचा हार, लहान शिरण, वज्रटीक व डोळे (पृ. १९१)

Pictures from the Marathi book Samvedi Christi Samaj by Father Francis Chorea.



केतक व गुलाब फुले (पृ. १९४)

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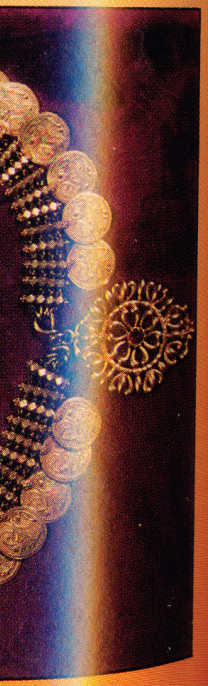


ठुशी (पृ. १९५)

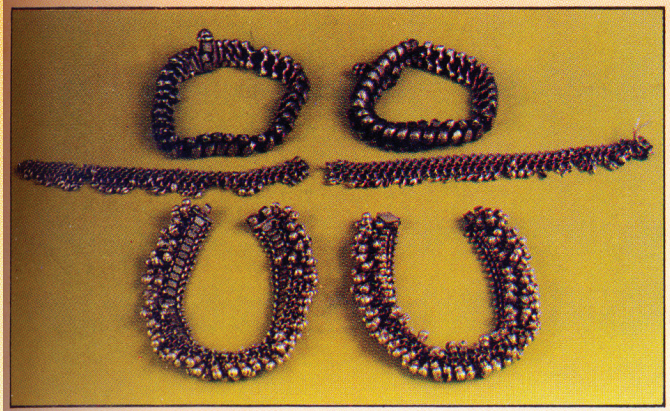
सोन्याचे कोत व कंठी (पृ. १९५)

दुलेडी व बोरमाळ (पृ. १९५)

चुडे, काळे कोत व नवाळे (पृ. १९१)

वाळा, दंडकडे व पैंजण (पृ. १९२)

गोफ व तोडा (पृ. १८९)



दागदागिने

पैंजण (पृ. १९०)

# MY TRAVEL

My first opportunity to witness the East Indian folk culture came in form of an invite to an East Indian Wedding at Sopara. Since I was not sure what to expect at a Maharashtrian Catholic wedding. I went with an open mind. Post attending Rupali and Macvin's wedding in Sopara I met several interesting people and developed an over-all understanding of the area. For my research hence forth apart from referring to books- I roamed in the countryside and tried partaking whatever part of East Indian life that I was allowed to.

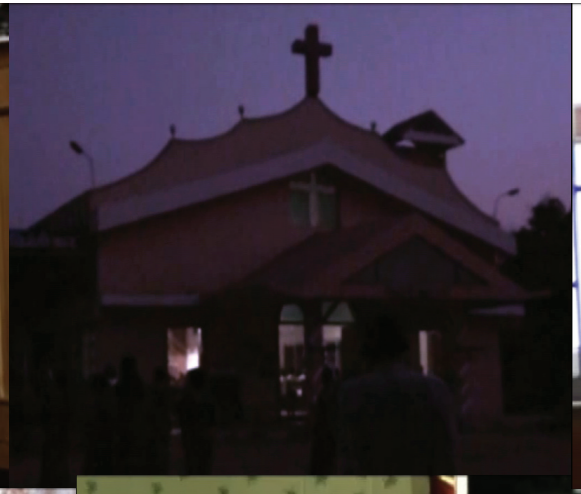
Apart from the wedding to which I got invited I had no other contacts amongst East Indians and I began wondering how do I meet more people? The answer came in form of a train journey where in I bumped into a Koli woman once and a woman farmer from Saphale region. I realised best place to network for my project is the local transport. So I would get on Virar trains and buses find an interested enough person, get information from them and go with them to wherever they belonged and began my observations from there. This way I met many interesting people and got inputs from them.

Through these meandering I covered areas of Nirmal, Arnala, Vasai, Vasai Fort, Paar naka, Mardes-Wagholi.

# SAMVEDI CHRISTIAN WEDDING

friday evening, stuff goes to the boy's house

getting ready, saturday morning mass

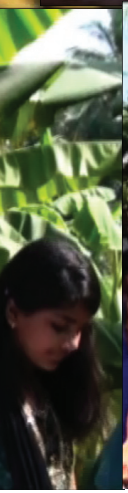


saturday evening, the boy's side visits

meanwhile, preparations to welcome guests

saturday evening prayers, before the wedding day

sunday, the wedding day!



girl's reception party, after the wedding

CONGRATULATION
HAPPY WEDDING
RUPALI
WEDS
MACVIAN

# EXPERIENCES- MARDES WAGHOLI



I attended the wedding of Rupali Mascarenhas and Macvin Gonsalves. I was told by Rupali's family that once upon a time the wedding would be a week long and the preceding celebrations, preparations would begin a month or so before, with the whole village being involved. Today however it is a weekend affair.

On Friday evening the bride's clothes etc are taken to the groom's house by two women and a girl from the bride's family. Her clothes get arranged in the cupboard at the groom's house. The important decorations like 'mandap' etc at the bride's house and another one where her reception will be held are in place by this time. The lighting decorations too are ready. The bride, Rupali in this case sat with henna covered hands as more cousins and friends flocked around her to wish her well. Rupali was nervous owing to the confession with Father the next day and the prayer she had to read before everyone during the Saturday morning mass.

Next morning, Rupali and family gathered at Velankani Mata Church, Mardes Wagholi. Rupali dressed in a saree. Post the Saturday mass and the confession, Rupali accompanied by her mother and aunt went to every household in the village asking for forgiveness and blessings of one and all. By the time they got back it was afternoon and the boys in the house, Rupali's cousins were putting together Banana plant decoration at the entrance to welcome the groom's family sans the groom later in the evening for the "Dagina" ceremony. This is a tradition that has continued from the pre-conversion Hindu times. Meanwhile the women

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of the house were preparing "Vade" the East Indian bread consumed on all festive occasions and gearing up for the gala dinner where villagers were invited to come witness the "Dagina" ceremony.

Rupali's house was buzzing with family and friends in the evening with the parishioners gathering in the courtyard for "Dagina" ceremony. On this occasion the women of the house sing songs but to my surprise there was a local DJ hired to spin music. He was playing popular English dance tracks and occasionally Hindi film music.

The groom's family arrived and gifted Rupali with sarees, Jewelry and "Veni" traditional flower garland for the hair. Post the ceremony everybody proceeded for dinner. It's the first time I saw "bread" as in "Paav" being a part of pre-wedding dinner. Bread is symbolic of the Body of the Christ and thus considered Divine and consumed on all festive occasions. There was fish, mutton and lots of rice to go with it.

No sooner the meals were done, the DJ began playing East Indian wedding songs. And everybody began to dance- the oldest and youngest- together. The dancing continued for a long time and towards the end alcohol was served. Alcohol too, is a part of all festive occasions here.

After the groom's family left- the dancing began with a renewed zest and continued for a long time. The youngsters got tired after a while but not the elders who kept dancing. People responded much more to East Indian songs than to Bollywood and English music. It was with a pinch of salt that I was told that family members singing songs had been replaced by a DJ.

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Post midnight, everybody retired exhausted yet jubilant. Next morning began with Rupali, now dressed in a white wedding gown garlanding the Cross in the home courtyard. The wedding band arrived and the bride, the band, the guests made their way to the church. Once at the Church, the Sunday mass took place in Marathi. It used to be

I noticed in these villages people liked to wear their religion not so much on their sleeve but on the thresholds of their houses. There was a system of displaying the Gods one worshipped in form of photos etc at the entrance of the house so that identity of faith-whether Christian or a Hindu became clear right at the very beginning.

in Latin, Rupali's father told me when he was a child. But later locals were educated in the ways of church so the clergy was Maharashtrian from then on and the masses began to happen in Marathi. What's more the Church Choir sang in Marathi- their songs reminded me a lot of bhajan-kirtans style of Bhakti Sangeet.

Post the Sunday mass, two weddings took place that day. As soon as the couples exchanged vows, there were fireworks and the respective wedding bands hired began to play one after other. Not to forget the photographers and videographers constantly making space for themselves right from Saturday evening to grab the much awaited wedding footage.

Post elaborate photo sessions, the married couple, families and guests on both sides and the wedding band of course made way to the bride's home for the bride's reception in the afternoon. The groom's reception would happen later in the evening at his house.
Time and again throughout all the customs and rituals I realised that Samvedi Christians have not given up their pre-Christianity Marathi roots. They have retained many customs from those times and added the newer Christian rituals to it. The 'Marathi'-ness and the 'Catholic'-ness went hand in hand. So much so that even they used mango leaves, Banana plants considered auspicious in Hindu weddings and followed customs like 'Halad' for the bride.

I noticed in all the households in these villages people liked to wear their religion not so much on their sleeve but on the thresholds of their houses.

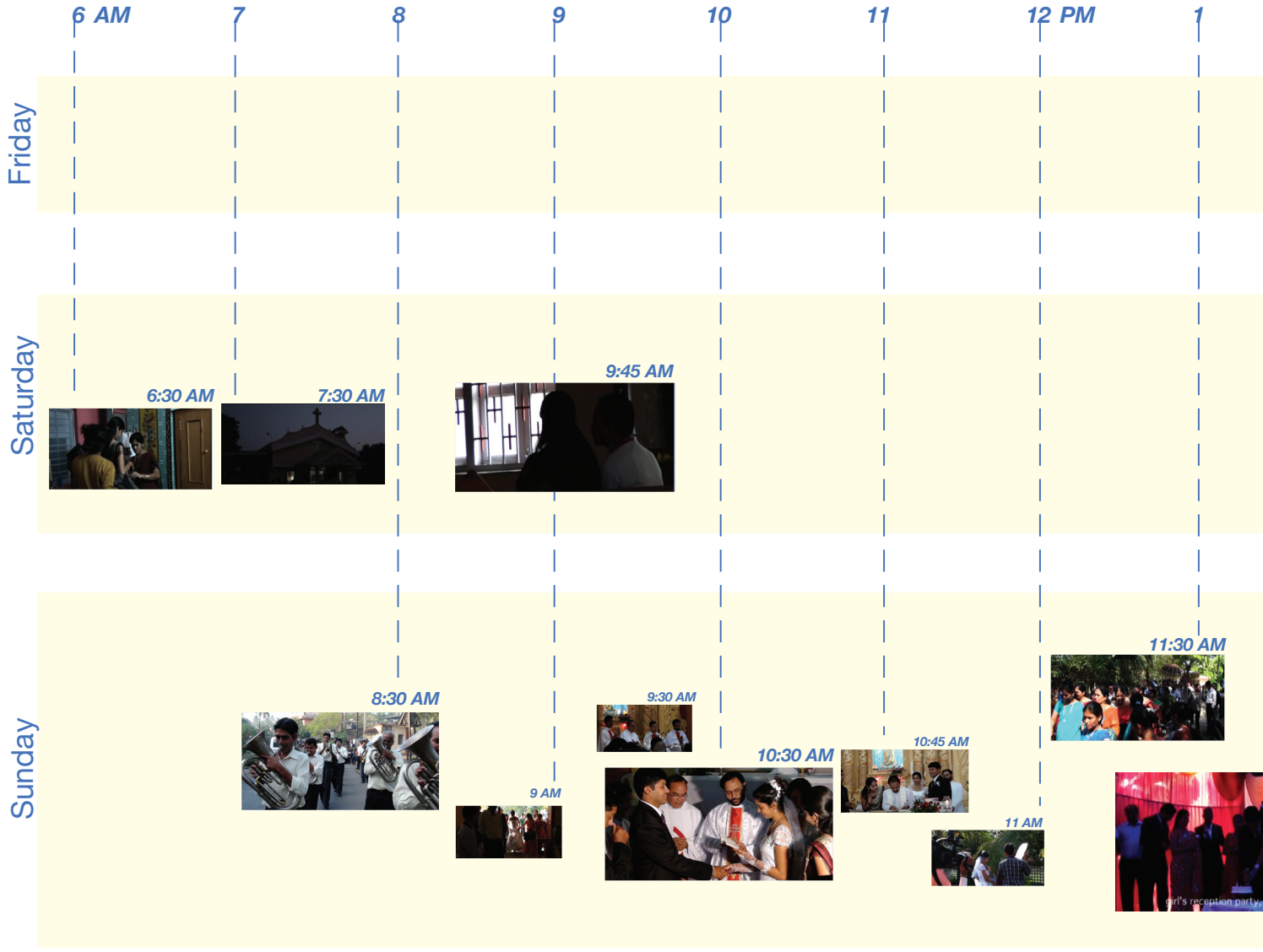
There was a system of displaying the Gods you worshipped at the entrance to your house so that identity of a Christian or a Hindu house became very clear right at the outset. If you remove these symbolic marks there was no other difference the way their houses or their lives were structured.

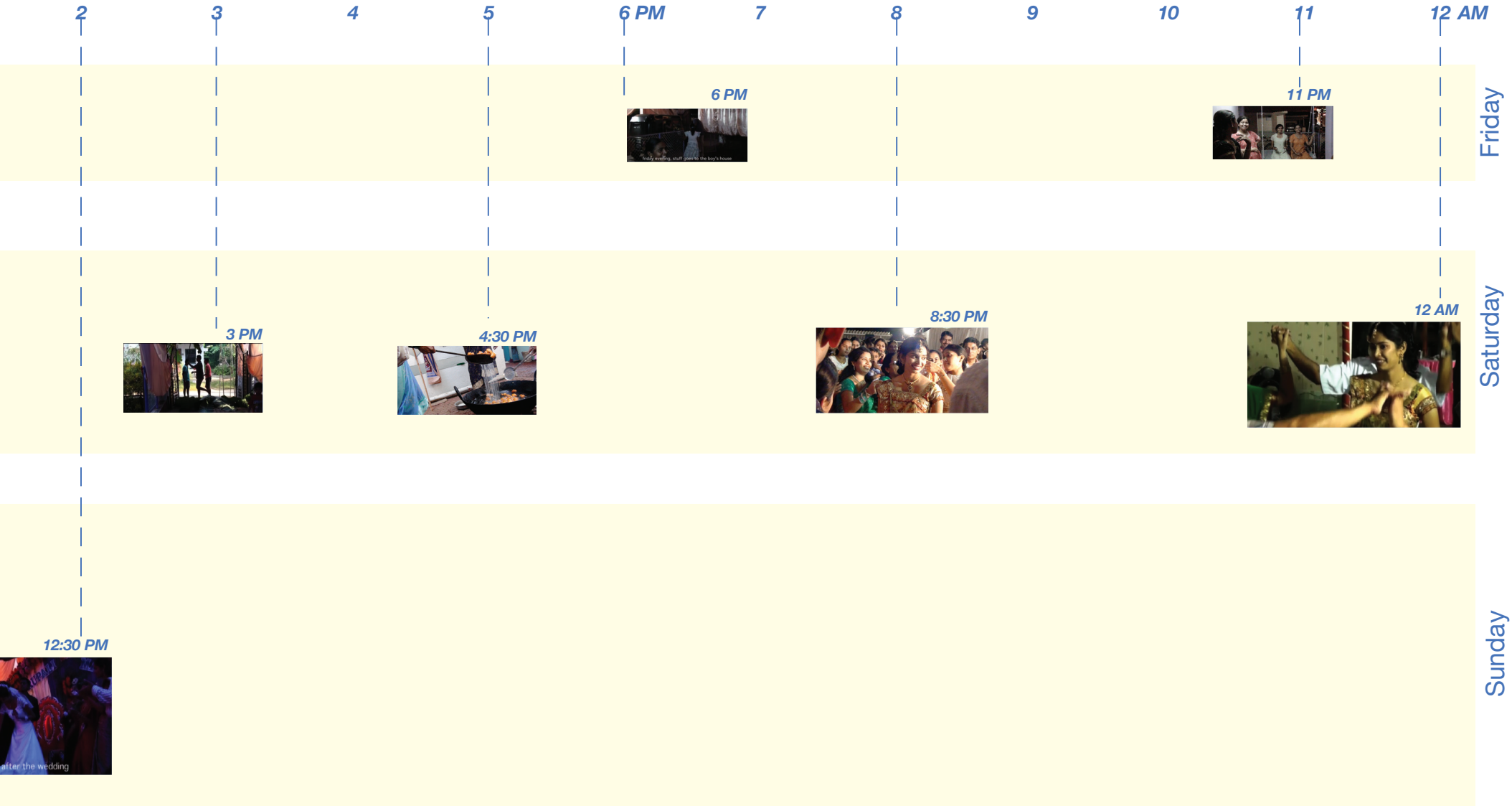
Despite of the new-found prosperity resulting from double to triple income resources per household (traditional job like agriculture/ fishing/ dairy + newer jobs like Banking/ engineering,

9. The swing or "Zoka" is not merely furniture, but the cornerstone of communication in Samvedi community.
10. The bride and father wait for groom's family to shop up for 'Dagina' ceremony, which is in fact the boy giving girl a dowry of sorts, consisting of sarees, jewelry, flowers etc.
11. Groom's sister plants the traditional hair garland or 'Veni' in the bride's hair. While this ceremony was on, there were women hired to sing the traditional wedding songs, however it was overheard that they did not do justice to the price they charged. As traditional songs are forgotten in the family, professional DJs and singers are being hired to compensate for it.
12. Before, during and after the wedding on Sunday morning, the wedding band on the way to church accompanying the bride before wedding. Consents signed by the couple and the clergy and witnesses. Finally, the photo-session in the church lawns post the wedding and before the bride's reception at her home.

teaching etc) Samvedis refuse to give up their village houses and move closer to the cities were their jobs are actually located. Stating that they cannot give up their spacious houses in the country side with a courtyard, a swing, a backyard for compact city apartments. Normally the entrance to the house begins through the courtyard, the threshold of living room connected by a passage, exiting through the kitchen door into the backyard with rooms on either side of this passage. So standing in the courtyard one sees all the way into the backyard. Courtyards and the swing therein is where family and friends gather for chats. It's the pillar of family communication in Vasai villages, whether the households are Hindu or Christian.

Another thing I noticed was that even though the joint family system is not prevalent today and smaller households have mushroomed, they all stay in vicinity and are forever available to each other. And the family is so tight-knit that telling children of one family from other becomes nearly impossible.






Wedding Time line as seen at the Girl's Parish.

# JAIHIND BRASS BAND



I interviewed Mr. Wilson D'Monte, band manager Jaihind Brass Band. The story of this band is fascinating because, it is story of individuals who during day time are bank managers, railway engineers, clerks, students but come Saturday-Sunday they become the very popular and well-respected Vasai wedding band. They are Samvedi Christians, that is they were Hindus once forcefully converted to Christianity and evangelized during the Portuguese rule in Mumbai, while retaining much of their Brahman traditions.

Through them one sees the intense desire to keep alive their culture and revive it making it relevant in today's "modern" society where folk traditions are disappearing into oblivion.

*Hello, can you tell me about your band?*
*The band is called Jaihind Brass Band, it was started in 1938 by my grandfather, then my farther took over, then I took over now he (pointing to his nephew) is the fourth generation, the youngest at 16. Now he will be taking over after me.*

*Is the brass band your full time profession?*
*It is just a hobby it is not our profession. Everybody is gainfully employed.*

*But, when do you practice then?*
*We practice daily at night between 9 to 10 PM.*

*Don't the neighbours complain?*
*No, no they also enjoy.*

*From what all areas are you?*
*All of us belong to the same area Vasai but all are from different villages; our village is Gass. He (pointing to another band member) is from this parish, village Wagholi.*

*So what kind of songs do you like to play?*
*We play mostly old songs. Old songs and then we have our local songs. The wedding songs... you will get to hear them now. You know them as East- Indian songs probably. That is specially of our Vasai area.*

*But what is your band's favourite song to play?*
*All old songs, classical songs....*

*Please name one particular favourite.*
*Swarnasundari- it's a classical song.*

*Normally what is the wedding season?*
*Our wedding season is between October to May, except 40 days lent period.*

*Oh so, between October to May- you will work on weekdays, practice every night and play on Sundays at the weddings?*
*Sundays and Saturdays. Our wedding starts from Saturday evening to Sunday evening.*

*You have been in this field for 34 years now, can you share some memorable experiences?*
*We have won a trophy for three times.*

*What kind of trophy is this?*
*This is an East-Indian music competition for bands at Vasai Taluka level. We won for three consecutive years.*

*Congratulations, that's great. So what's the plan for the day?*
*Right now after the wedding in the church, we will accompany the wedding party to the bride's place for the bride's reception. In the afternoon both Bride and Groom will leave for Groom's place. We will accompany them because Groom has his reception later in the evening at 8pm. By that time we will be free.*

*Thanks for doing this interview with me. You all played very well.*
*Thank you.*

With more cash flowing in people have pulled down their wooden wadas for ‘modern’ houses. Which are neither cool nor do they fit in with the costal weather. Only handful wadas survive today.

# SUKELI

Prakash Naik’s house is last of the few surviving old world “Vaada” houses in Mardes Wagholi. It’s a wooden structure with beautiful florics carved in the wooden walls and pillars of the house. It’s mango-tiled. I asked him about the house and he told me- “its difficult maintaining this old style house with termites and general hygiene but there are heart-strings involved- it’s a family heirloom”. I asked him about his farms as he showed me around his house, he said he is currently concentrating on “Sukeli” which is his major non-monsoon business. He said he supplies to lots of Malvani shops in and around Mumbai. He was shocked to find out that I had not heard of Sukeli at all. He took me on an educational tour to his terrace where scores of Bananas were spread out for sun-drying. “The ripe Bananas are being dried to be preserved for longer and can be consumed on the lines of the present day tinned desserts”, he said. He urged me to try one. As I gingerly picked one- it was one gooey mass and I was not sure it looked appetising enough to me, I decided to just put it in my mouth unwilling to be rude to my warm host. But it was one of the most amazing, naturally preserved desserts I have had- no artificial flavours or preservatives mind you. He then took me to the “Banana room” where thousands of Banana lay waiting to be dried on the terrace. There were countless tiny rooms in that “Vaada” there was a “rice room” too. The rice it contained was husked. Reminded me of quaint farming villages off the Indian map. I thanked my host for the “Sukeli” and introducing me to the splendour of a “Vaada”. And hoped it survives ‘modernisation’.

13. Naik on the swing outside what is one of the few last surviving old style “Vaada” houses. The door frame behind him is beautifully carved wood and bears photos of Hindu Gods as marks of religious identity of the household.
14. “Rangoli” outside Naik’s house. The steps too bear marks of white dots in triplets.
15. Naik re-arranging the ripe bananas to make “Sukeli” which means dried bananas (Sukeli- dried, keli- bananas)
16. Sun-kissed, sun-dried ripe bananas. Bananas are normally easily perishable, sun drying acts like a natural preservative and these are consumed as is from the packet as a side dish during meals. Naik supplies “Sukeli” to lots of shops in and around Mumbai, it adds to his agricultural income.

IN MEMORY
OF

17

# NIRMAL CHURCH

Nirmal is a village with religious importance to both Hindu and Christian brethren.

The Church at Nirmal is a Franciscan Church built in 1557-58. The Latin name is Monte Kalvario meaning the church on the hill similar to the hillock (Mount Kalvario in Palestine) where Jesus sacrificed his life. The church was built in 1558 and was destroyed in 1739 after the Marathas took over the Arnala fort. The church had to move its services to the west of Mote Talao. Christians from Gaas, Bhuigaon, Nirmal used to offer all religious rites in this place for more then 125 years, hence this place started being known as Santacruz. It was only after the initiatives taken by Father Pedre Paulo Derjaro that on 2nd September 1853 a settlement was made with the local Hindu chiefs and the destroyed church was rebuilt. It was inaugurated in 1856 also marking the third centenary year of this religious district. The annual festival of Ampar Mauli is celebrated by the church with great pomp and ceremony.

Inside the Church, it is interesting to note that Virgin Mary with baby Jesus is dressed not in European robes but in a Pink Saree. Similarly- I literally stumbled on graves of people on the Church floor in between the seating area. The stained glass panels tell a story where Jesus is depicted with Indians.

17. Inside the Nirmal Church, Indianised Virgin Marry is clear sign of how Christianity has been adopted and adapted by the villages here.

18. This beautiful Basalt temple from Peshwa time was painted yellow to make it look ‘spic-span’ by the temple priest. This attempt of renovation as opposed to restoration has led to loss of details in terms of stone carvings of the temple walls, sculptures etc.
19. The view from the temple terrace, overlooking  Nirmal and the Nirmaleshwar lake.

# ADI SHANKARACHARYA MATH

Nirmal is home to the Adi Shankaracharya Math, a place considered holy by Hindus. Located here is the ‘ Jeevant Samadhi’ of Swami Vidyaranyabharati . After six years of being appointed as the eighth Shankaracharya at the Shrungeri Peeth, Swami Vidyaranyabharati came to Vasai to spread the teachings of Veda.

In around 1742-1750 Peshwa Subedar Shankaraji Keshav Phadke built the Nirmaleshwar Temple. On the auspicious day of Kartiki Ekadashi a huge ‘Yatra’ is held here followed by carrying of a “Palakhi” the next day.

To the west of this, at the Suleshwar temple- the last rites of Hindus are carried out. Thus Nirmal is considered Holy by both Hindu and Christian brethren.

The irony however is that, the temple from the times of Peshwa has been “renovated”. Implying it has been plastered with cement-concrete and painted yellow. As a result all the details of carvings whether on the stone walls or stone sculptures of yesteryear have been lost. Even the stone flooring has been replace with a marble flooring. I spoke to the temple priest who had undertaken this renovation project and he matter of factly told me that he is the tenth generation of their family taking care of the temple and knew what was best for it. He further added that when the temple had stone flooring and the not so renovated interiors people were not showing up at the temple, when they did they were not willing to sit down as the stone flooring was not pleasant.

However now with these more “presentable” interiors one might feel like visiting the temple. At this point I asked him weren’t the stone sculptures in the stone temple themselves “taap-tip” as he put it in Marathi. But he answered my question with another question: “What right does a girl like you have to ask me such a question who herself is dressed up like a boy with a hair cut so short? Why are not you wearing a saree or any Indian outfit?” At this point I was stunned and did not know what to say. I also realised that my question had rubbed him the wrong way.

While in a conversation with Sridutta Raut of Vasai Kille Mohim, who has taken it upon himself to conserve and protect the monuments of Vasai and is largely funded by self and other friends and no political party or a corporate- I was told that, this exercise or renovation was largely a premise to raise money for the stakeholders.

Whatever be the case, the true essence conservation and/or preservation of an ancient artefact needs to be looked into and questioned.

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# VISIT TO ARNALA

The day I visited Arnala, Maghi Ganpati festival had begun and the atmosphere was extremely festive. And the moment I boarded the bus to Arnala village, I had begun to sense the village through sight and smell. The fisherwomen and their baskets in the bus told me what to expect.

The fishing village of Arnala has evolved like a labyrinth with passages within that lead to the Arnala beach, overlooking an island on which Arnala fort stands. I made it there by afternoon around 2:30 PM and could not visit the fort as the ferries do not ply between 2 to 4. A look around the village revealed all the houses revolved around the primary occupation of fishing. Most of the people here had retained their traditional costume unlike in Vasai. Outside every home were fishing nets, baskets, fish and prawns being dried. Everything here is extremely laborious and no one at leisure not even the very old and very young. Everybody was busy working.

Houses and shops were arranged in one elongated array. Outside one of the shops lay heaps of anchors which looked like a sculpture in itself. I was told that they were not intentionally a sculpture but up for sale. There were huge sky blue coloured balls everywhere which were in fact weights that help the nets sink to the sea-bed when left overnight for deep-sea fishing. They prevent the nets from wandering off in the sea.

A friendly fisher woman taught me how to link two Bombay ducks together for drying them and invited me for the community weddings in February. She said that all weddings in the community happen on same day so that everybody could be present otherwise somebody or the other is always at the sea with little scope of socialising.

20. Even the buses going to Arnala smell of fish, as fisherwomen rely on public transport to move the fish to market.
21. A tourist examines the anchor-sculpture, they were not unattended, the shop owner stayed above the shop.
22. A typical fishing household where the courtyard perhaps becomes more important than the indoors. Its also a place for family to gather.
23. Drying Bombil or Bombay duck, in order to preserve it and sell it as dry fish in market to be consumed round the year even in fishing off-season.

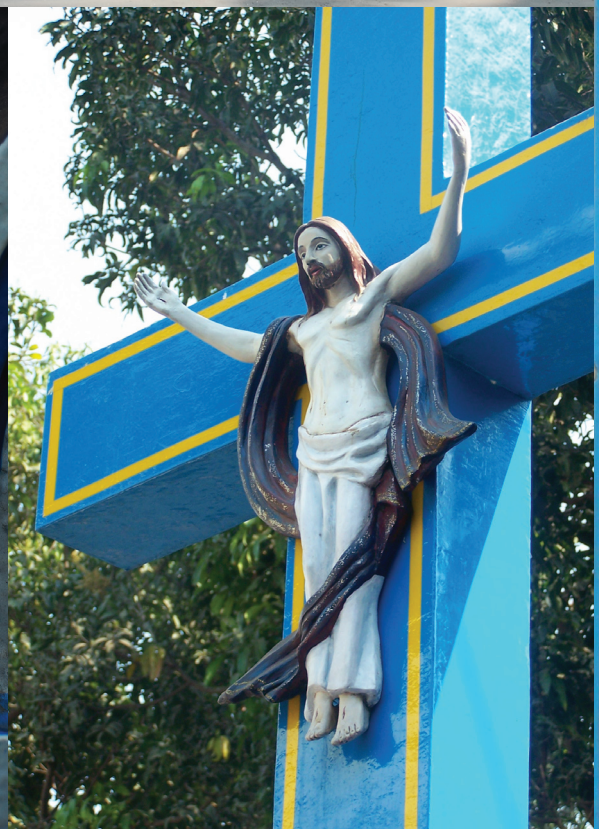
# VISIT TO PAAR NAKA



En route to Vasai fort one passes Paar Naka. It's essentially a market place and has the charm similar to a "Peth" in Pune. It had several shops, but this one particular shop stocking Puja samagri and other religious books, incense etc was very quaint and likeable. It lay near the Papri Church with its beautiful stained glass windows. Apart from religious stuff 'Mhatre General Stores' also sold simple toys, locks , torches etc.

A couple of steps away from the shop lay what was known as Mauli's cross. A big hoarding near the Cross invited one and all to the feast in the Remedy village on 12th of February when a new statue of the Mother would be brought in

Both Christian and Hindu devotees are Believers of this particular roadside shrine. But a small board put up by the local parish seems to have rubbed a few people the wrong way. The board declares The Cross to be property of the Church. While a local who spoke to me told me that since it is located on the road, which is a public property it should not belong to an individual or an institution but to all the public at large. The conversation we had did not reveal much in terms of what the issue was and it requires further investigation. Whilst various religions, castes communities have coexisted peacefully in Vasai this sentiment and/or habit of "othering" strains the equations between different communities creating a volatile vibe in the atmosphere. Perhaps one needs to scratch beneath the "all is well" surface to know the truth.



24. Maulicha Cross, a roadside shrine has become a matter of tussle with the local Church trying to assert its power over the monetary collections of the shrine and the Hindu devotees who feel it belongs to all not a particular institution as it is on the road and hence public property. A board put up by the church calling this Cross its property sparked off this debate
25. An interesting, quaint Puja shop at Paar Naka selling materials needed for worship in nearby Shani Temple.

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## Siddheshwar Temple

At some distance between Paar Naka ad Vasai Fort lies a very old Siddheshwar Temple from 15th Century. Outside the temple lies a very old banyan tree where lots of idols and images of Gods and Goddesses have been gathered and are worshipped. It was delightful to see a stone idol of Ganapati in a very abstract form. I had been told that many of these idols have been abandoned by people or were merely found somewhere and were left under the tree. Like other stone temples this too had been coloured but the inner sanctum sanctorum was mostly retained as is giving it a lot of charm. Not to forget the Deepmala outside the temple.

## VASAI FORT

Since Vasai fort is Rs.5 share rickshaw ride away from Paar Naka  I had decided to walk assuming it wasn't as far. However, the very long tar road refused to end. Finally I saw the walls of the fort and an ASI office. Most of the fort is in ruins now. But the magnificence of what it must have once been is overwhelming. While walking, I could see lot of fisherwomen travel in and out with their fishing baskets in the rickshaws which told me that a Koliwada lay nearby.

This fort was originally built by invading Muslims prior to the Portuguese coming. Most of the fort including the surrounding wall was probably built by the Portuguese. A sign at the entrance explains the fort's entire history. One of the more interesting historical places of interest is one church where a Christian cemetery lies in the middle. One can still read their names,

written in Latin, complete with first and last names, year of death (mostly in the 1600's) as well as their family symbols.

The original pre-Portuguese fort was a very small portion of the existing perimeter. It was part of the central fortified area, enlarged and remodelled by the Portuguese and known by them as fort St. Sebastien (S. Sebastiao). The larger perimeter is entirely Portuguese with the possible exception of the "sea gate" (east), which could be Maratha built. Therefore, Bassein was not a fort strictly speaking but a fortified town. The remains of the town hall, Captain's house, hospital, cathedral, convents of Franciscans, Augustinians, Jesuits and Dominicans, still exist and are clearly identified by historians.

It was established by the Portuguese as the headquarters of their Indian operations in 1534 and centre of their operations until 1739. In the 18th century, the fort was attacked by the Maratha army under Peshwa Baji Rao's brother Chimaji Appa, and fell in 1739 after a three year long campaign.

The ramparts overlook Vasai creek and are

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almost complete, though overgrown. Several watch-towers still stand, with safe staircases leading up.

The Portuguese buildings inside the fort are in ruins, although there are enough standing walls to give a good idea of the floor plans of these structures. Some have well-preserved façades. In particular, many of the arches have weathered the years remarkably well. They are usually decorated with carved stones, some weathered beyond recognition, others still displaying sharp chisel marks.

Three chapels inside the fort are still recognisable. They have façades typical of 17th century Portuguese churches. The southernmost of these has a well preserved barrel vaulted ceiling.

Archaeological Survey of India has started the restoration work of Vasai fort. One can not call this restoration, what's being done is renovation. The job contracted to a local contractor who seems to have little knowledge about restoration. There are also encroached structures within the Fort area. The Fort area is not preserved by the Indian government. Thus allowing some illegal activities inside the Fort. During the week days its not advisable for tourists or women to visit this place.

The Killabandar buses go to the fort. There are buses every half hour. Ticket costs you Rs.7 and you can get off at the last stop and start walking around. Auto Rickshaws are also available which can be hired from the main road

outside the station but it would cost you around Rs...10.00 per head.

Today, Sridutta Raut and his wife, residents of Vasai along with fellow citizens and with help of trekkers like the Trekshitij group from Dombivli are working towards the conservation of the fort in their own ways. They help spread awareness about the monument through writings, photographs etc every week in the fort. They also help remove the weeds and shrubs growing on the ruins that damage even the heaviest of stones, dislodging them. These activities are currently being pursued under the name of 'Vasai Kille Mohim". Sridutta has been working on this project for past eight years. He is now also planning to start similar conservation activities at Arnala fort.

26. Extremely graphic forms, Basalt idols of Lord Ganesha, many such idols can be found scattered around Vasai. They have been sourced from dilapidated shrines inside the Vasai Fort. Many times people too when they move out etc leave the idols they possess by the trees and when a sizeable number has gathered worship begins at such places.
27. Many of the shapes on the stone carvings are mythic figures. Often times renovation as opposed to restoration completely distorts them and sends them beyond recognition.
28. Majestic Deepmala outside Siddeshwar Temple stands as is requiring almost no maintenance.
29. The ruins of the Vasai Fort, seen as soon as one enters. The slabs on the floor are in fact graves with stone inscriptions.
30. ASI has being engaging in restoration efforts here at Vasai fort, but with the work outsourced to a local contractor who understands only renovation and not restoration, cement-concrete that has being slapped on the fort walls is causing it to look as if it was built yesterday not 450 years ago.
31. Some stone inscriptions that bear the Portuguese seal and carry information regarding their rule over Vasai.
32. What is speculated to be the mother of all Churches in Vasai seen today. One of the many churches built inside the fort by Portuguese, most of them are in ruins today.

# VASAI KOLIWADA

There was indeed a Koliwada hidden inside the fort lanes of which kept getting narrow and narrow until they ended in a house. An older Koli Christian woman sweeping the court yard of the house was very sceptical of the camera around my neck and ordered me to leave at once. No amount of cajoling made her yield. Finally her granddaughter decided my answer to her question “Kai Pahije” was not good enough and I left.

Disappointed and mildly threatened I began walking back the way I had entered the Koliwada to hear loud music being played and loud announcements happening somewhere in the distance. Some Koli wedding which happen only in the evening was about to start and the Fishermen council elections has just been done with in the afternoon. So the atmosphere was festive although we were not exactly welcomed near the wedding mandap. However a group of women headed to some other village for a wedding posed for us on the condition we give them copies of their photographs. They yelled their names as the jeep they were in drove off.

# TODDY TAPPER

Walking back slightly disappointed that I had not been able to get anybody to open up with me I was thrilled to see a Toddy Tapper. They are a rarity these days I had been told. I began to chatter eagerly with him in Marathi only to realise that he was not Marathi but from the north. It was so difficult to tell somehow with his toddy tapping gear and the way he dressed that he in fact had no ‘state’ identity left. The only identity that came through was that of a toddy tapper. There were several others like him mostly from North. The job being very risky and comparatively paying little, local labour was hard to find leading to migrant labour being engaged in a very traditional job unique to the costal region which is also the case with most laborious jobs today in Vasai.

33. These Koli women on their way to a marriage ceremony were all dressed in identical synthetic sarees. The traditional ‘Kat padar’ sarees have given way to synthetic wash and wear sarees which are not only zero maintenance but dry fast and are perceived as modern and hence stylish although they are not very healthy as in the fabric does not breathe, which is a requirement for the muggy costal weather.
34. Toddy tapping is a traditional costal profession involving very high risk and paying very meagre wages. Hence only migratory labour is seen engaged in such high risk, high labour, low paying jobs with most of the local population now well-off with their white-collared jobs. This toddy tapper came from Chattisgarh and spoke no Marathi or any local dialect.

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# SALT FARMS MIRA ROAD

Agri community can be further sub-divided into ‘Dasagri’, Urap (Varap) and Kharpatil. Many Dasagris and Uraps were ‘Jamindars’ and farmers. This community once lagging in education is making much headway today. Kharpatils grow rice in saline lands and engage in salt-farming. Some of the Aagris had converted to Christianity in the time of Portuguese rule but converted back to Hinduism after Portuguese left. These re-converts are now known by the name “Nave-marathe”. Some years ago there were differences between the Aagris and the “Nave-marathe”.

A watchman guarding the salt-farms warned us not to click any pictures saying his “Sheth” won’t like it. The salt-farm land is owned by government and leased out to salt-farmers.

The labour engaged in tending to the farm and actual salt making in this case came from Gujarat and one person from Bengal. They stayed in very small huts by the salt-farms, fished in the near by fresh water lake and only took a Sunday off to visit places they wanted to. Otherwise they had to be at the farm six days a week from 7AM. till late afternoon. They work round the year except in monsoons when they retire to their respective villages. I was surprised to know that both fresh water from lakes and salty water pumped out with means of bore well is used for salt making. This water is pumped into the salt-farm labyrinths which are built such that water travels along them from one point to other. So water pumped out reaches a temperature of 25 degrees it is made to circulate around the pans and finally salt is obtained as the water keeps evaporating leaving behind salt deposits by the pans. Which have to be collected and made into mounds that are heaped on the ridges on the salt pans. Its a very laborious, literally back breaking job in extreme heat. It has adverse effects on eyes (reflected light) and feet (the skin suffers due to highly saline water for long hours).

35. Salt-farming is another traditional occupation of the costal region. The government leases out land to salt-farmers., supervisors are local people but actual physical work which is extremely laborious and requires slogging in high temperatures is done by migrant labour from all over India etc.
36. The local term for getting the land for the salt farm ready is lipai.
37. The water used is a mixture of salt water pumped using bore well, this farm had 7 of them and fresh water from the ponds nearby. This mixed water is collected in one area of the salt farm and its movement is controlled by pipes and the maze created out of soil. After it reaches about 25 degrees it is allowed to circulate across a vast area till salt appears as water starts evaporating. The salt is then collected in mounds on the ridges of the maze.

# MALVANI MOHOTSAV

Around the time of my visit the Malvani Festival was on at the Manikpur Maidan, in Vasai. These festivals were largely started by local politicians to showcase the traditions and culture of various communities. Today its more or less regelated to being a “fun-fair” with stalls of food, sugar-candy, games, Dabeli, name on rice, trinkets etc. Perhaps the only Malvani components to this festival were a stall selling all sorts of dried fish which were bought from Malvan. And the stalls serving sea-food, floated by the SHGs of women in Vasai Fort Koliwada.

At times, there are dances, singing etc too but in this one had stalls of food, shopping, bikes and scooters and rides for children. Apart from that was the Vasai Kille Mohim stall which was a photography exhibition of sorts. Showcasing what forts and temples around Bombay were like and what remains of them today. They were also selling some of their informative books on understanding forts, their components etc.

There was an idol of Vetoba, the gram-devata or the village deity worshipped by people of Malvan.

38. Dried fish for sale at the Malvani Mohotsav at Vasai. These Mohotsavs are aimed at promoting culture, getting people together and keep alive old food habits etc. Also, like this one sponsored by a political party they become good PR exercises for local politicians. This stall was managed by a dried fish trader. Who simply buys fish from whole sale market in Malvan ad sells them here. This time he had fish worth Rs. 26,000 and after this fair wraps up he was going to carry whatever remains to three more fairs like this one which were in offing.
39. The menu card of a food stall managed by an SHG from Vasai Koliwada. Such Mohotsavs mean good business for these SHGs.
40. Except for the food stalls there was nothing much reflecting Malvani culture here. Most of the stalls were typical to any fair or even a Chowpatty like the cotton candy stall, the rides for children etc. Seen here is a stall where bursting the balloons with the gun will fetch one a prize. Interestingly the person managing this stall is oil painting ‘hirve moong’ that is pulses to become silver bullets for the guns.

41. A crowd of more then 3000 people gathers at the Gass Church, Nalasopara on the occasion of Good Friday.  Gass Church is dedicated to the Saint Gonsalo Gracia.
42. The service begins with Father narrating several stories from the Bible and reminding all of the sacrifice Jesus made when crucified at Calvary.
43. The Choir has keyboard, percussion, string, blow instruments and people singing. One notices though a choir it has Maharashtrianized to an extent that all the hymns etc are Marathi

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The Good Friday service at Gass followed a similar pattern. It began with prayers and narrating the story of why Jesus was crucified and what is the importance of the suffering He underwent. The priest then went on to say in times of hopelessness one should remember that there will be ‘Calvarys’ in everyone’s life and one should never loose faith. Post Initial prayers, was the Veneration of Cross. Since a crowd of more than 3000 people had gather at the Church that day several Crosses were put out and people individually came forward to pray by kissing the feet of Jesus on the Cross and offered money, in the collection boxes kept. Post this was the Communion. By the time all these rituals took place and everybody settled down. began the recreation of scene where Christ was unmounted from the cross.



# GOOD FRIDAY SERVICE

The Catholic Church treats Good Friday as a fast day in which the faithful abstain from eating meat. In countries where Good Friday is not a day of rest from work, the afternoon liturgical service is usually put off until a few hours after the recommended time of 3 p.m. That is when the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord takes place in the afternoon, ideally at three o’clock, but for pastoral reasons a later hour may be chosen. The vestments used are red (more commonly) or black (more traditionally). The liturgy consists of three parts: the Liturgy of the Word, the Veneration of the Cross, and Holy Communion. [Source: Wikipedia]

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44. The Veneration of the Cross
45. Collection Prayer and the Communion.
46. Recreation of Passion of Chris

Few parishioners dressed up in the black robes of Jews and helped dismount Jesus from the Cross and then the statue of Jesus was left in a death-bed carried from within the Church, to the cross where the statue for laid to rest for a while till all the devotees come and kiss the feet of Jesus statue. By the time everyone was done it was post sunset. The statue of Jesus, along with the statue of Mother Mary was carried around the village before returning to the Church. Men carried the statue of Jesus , in the death bed on their shoulders. While women carried the statue of Mother Mary. Everybody had candles and prayed, chanted hymns etc as they went of a candle-lit Vigil of sorts. After taking one full circle around the Church outside Church premises. Both Jesus and Mary statues were brought back. Some more prayers and stories followed from the priest. What is surprising is that a crowd of 3,000 was in state of pin drop silence.

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# BRASS BAND MOHOTSAV

Sunday, that is the day of resurrection and thus Easter coincided with Brass Band Mohotsav. Some eight bands from Vasai compete on an informal stage. The tradition of having Brass Bands and organizing a Brass Band public concert began at the Nandakhal Church. It used to be a competition once but now its merely a get together. Such competition push the band members to practice further and hone their skills. Also it gives them a public platform to showcase their talents and present music of their choice.

47. Here we see Wilson D'Monte practice at home.
48. Followed by his band greeting the chief guests on the day of Band Mohotsav.
49. Father praying for the well being of all the Brass Band managers and thanking them for their contribution to the Gaothan culture of Vasai.
50. The crowd starts dancing marking end of the band Mohotsav.

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# CONCLUSION

It is difficult to conclude when one has just begun to understand a context and ask questions. The serpentine roads of villages in Vasai running along a landscape of lakes, farms and the sea ask me for how long will they stand the test of time. In places, urbanisation has already taken root. First the traditional jobs were given up, then the notion of housing was redefined. Quickly enough the East Indian 'Gaothans' became like any other urban/ suburban place. The song that was rooted in daily activities and which graced all the special occasions was captured on to the CDs to be played by a DJ. Remixes were made out of it. The traditional 'lugda' was given up for dressing to suit the needs and comforts of our times. The only surviving traditions today are being conserved by the institution of marriage.

The dichotomy lies in the fact that when one section of East Indian community has become very educated and prosperous- the other one has been left behind, in the rural areas, along the sea-costs where they still engage in traditional occupations and it is here that the culture survives. So how does one make this culture relevant to today's East Indian youth? There are feasts held at various Parishes were traditions are showcased, the culture 're-constructed'. Somehow, the efforts to revive the culture seem akin to those of ASI to revive the Vasai Fort- while the ruins might have been strengthened by slapping on of cement and concrete the details are being lost. Making the monument look like it was built yesterday. Perhaps the culture will only survive in form of photographs, books, multi-media if an intervention is not made soon.

51. This graffiti is reflection of the current times at Vasai. All religions and communities have been known to coexist peacefully in Vasai. But these days if one scratches beneath the surface the political and religious tension becomes apparent. Hindus feel a sense of mistrust towards Christians citing the recent conversions' issue. Samvedi Brahmans who were forced to convert centuries ago- feel the need to constantly prove their Christian-ness as well as they feel slighted by the Brahman community. Politicians are capitalizing on this insecurity creating an ugly mess. Although no violence has been reported, the situation is tense beneath the calm surface.

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People
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Mascarenhas Family, Wagholi
Prakash Naik, Wagholi
Gonsalves Family, Umrale
Jeevan Darshan, Giriz
Father Andrews, Bishop House, Vasai
Care-taker, Nirmal Church
Priest, Adi Shankaracharya Math
Sridutta Raut, Vasai Kille Mohim
Jaihind Brass Band, Gass
D'monte Family, Gass
People of Wagholi Village
People of Arnala Village
People of Remedy Village
People of Vasai Koliwada
People at salt-farms, Mira Road
People of Gass Village

Places
Wagholi Village
Nirmal Village
Gass Village
Arnala Village
Nala Sopara
Giriz Village
Vasai Fort, Koliwada
Paar Naka, Vasai
Remedy Village
Salt Farms, Mira Road


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