



## AN ETHNO ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH TOWARDS THE MYTHOLOGICAL BELIEF OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY– A CASE STUDY FROM UPPER REACHES OF MULA RIVER BASIN, FROM PARTS OF AHMEDNAGAR DISTRICT.

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### Introduction

When science and technology has no answer to a catastrophe, Mythology emerges as the life line to the people losing faith and sinking in disparities of a calamity. Religion is a belief of a commune on divine, upon which lies the infrastructure of pulsating endeavourer of humanity. In early days, the science and technology did not evolve to sophisticate and facilitate humanity. The human race was at the disposal of day's scourging sun, night's threat from darkness and paranormal illusions, threat from diseases and death. They had only one hope then in those days, where their misfortune got a shield and support and that was their belief on the supernatural powers which run the whole universe.

India is the land of God and Goddess. There are several religious beliefs along with the diverse community. There is a mention of 33 crore Gods and Goddesses in Hindu scriptures. They all worshipped for different reasons. They all were protectors, but one had control over rain, the other over wind, one was worshipped for the safety on earth and the other for safety from fire. This culture and practice have percolated in the traditions of today's India from our past and is still being practiced by various communities and tribes. Several hills of Sahyadri and adjoining areas are associated with tribal deities and several in these are symbol of the conservation of biodiversity. These goddesses are always having strong affinity with the environment and thus must be interpreted as the protector of environment.

Here is an ethnographical approach to conduct the study of the Mythological beliefs of the tribal group in Mula river basin (Fig.1). The paper is an effort to highlight the religious beliefs and social structure of these people by studying their life ways based on the analysis of their material and non-material traditions of the present society, and to study the biodiversity of the region and deriving the link between Mythology and biodiversity.

### Previous Work

The first divine instinct in man (*Homo sapiens*) is love for the mother. Mother, a beautiful creation of nature that creates and nurtures her offspring and synthesizes it with life. The whole universe moves around the term 'mother'. It must have been the power to create and nurture in front of whom must have humanity bowed its head. Mother Goddess is a personification of nature, motherhood, fertility, creation, destruction and the supreme power who embodies the bounty of the Earth. The worship of "Mother Goddess" prevailed in ancient world in different forms. She was worshipped as 'great mother', 'Goddess of Earth', 'virgin', 'Goddess of fertility' etc.(Suresh Vasant 1995:301). Mother Goddess was represented as the creative force in all nature, the mother of all things, responsible for the renewal of life (James, E.O).

The worship of Divine Mother can be traced back to prehistoric world. The first Upper Paleolithic female figurine was discovered in 1864 by Marquis de Vibraye at Laugerie Basse (Dordogne, France), she belongs to Magdalenian culture. But the earliest specimen that dates back to 35000 years (C<sup>14</sup>) was recently discovered in 2008 from Hohle Felo. It was 6 cm figurine made up of Mammoth Tusk and belongs to Aurignacian culture of upper Paleolithic Europe. However, the first upper Paleolithic evidence of Mother Goddess worship in Indian context came from Newal in the Gariga valley in the form of a stone torso. Another figurine was discovered by G. R. Sharma of Allahabad University from 3<sup>rd</sup> gravel deposit of Lohanda Nala of Belan Valley in Allahabad district. It was made up of bone and was also interpreted to be a bone harpoon by some scholars. A piece of such evidence emerged in the upper Palaeolithic context at Baghor I, the excavators of Allahabad and Berkeley Universities located a



triangular piece of natural stone which dates back to 9000-8000 BC. Such stones are found even today on the top of Kaimur escarpment, placed on rubble platform and worshipped as Shakti (Chakrabarti, Dilip K.,1999.82). The earliest depictions of Mother Goddess icons are found in the rock paintings of Jaora, Madhya Pradesh (Wakankar, V.S. 1992, 329). Similar depictions of nude female figurine was seen in the rock paintings of Australia.

One of the forms of Mother Goddess was 'Goddess earth', embodying the fertile earth that has the capacity to nurture life. Earth Goddess is mentioned as 'Prithvim Matram' in Taitriya Brahmana. Earth was worshipped as Divine mother by the names of Aditi, Prithvi or Mahimata too in Rig Veda. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C, the fertility cult was prevalent in the Indus as well as the trade cities of the Indus valley. Mother Goddess and her male counterpart the Proto Shiva were the divine deities in the Indus Saraswati valley. In the Harappan context the worship of the Mother Goddess can be traced back to the Pre-Harappan times. Evidences from several sites of Afganistan, Baluchistan, Sindh throws ample light over the Mother Goddess cult in Pre-Indus age.

The earliest evidence of squatting Goddess was discovered from the first level of Rehman Dheri (early Kot Digi 3200-2800 B.C.) on an ivory pendant that figures a frog, like a squatting woman. The figure is very similar to the one on the sealing of Ur. This posture is similar to the Rigvedic Goddess 'Aditi' in late periods.

A number of terracotta female figurines have been found in the Harappan cities from Harappa, Mohenjodaro and Banawali.

Terracotta female figurines were found at Malwa site of Navdatoli. The female figurine discovered from Inamgaon are of two types with head and without head. Some figurines are too inarticulate and no attempt was made to show the physical features. One of these bear punched marks around the neck. Some other figurines have flat body. These are two more figurines with large pendant breasts indicative of fertility. An appliqué design on a storage jar found from Late Jorwe at Inamgaon shows a human headed panther. A similar motif was even found on a jar fragment. The representation is taken to be that of Proto Durga as lion or tiger is associated with her and she was interpreted as a Goddess of fertility. From Inamgaon itself two more female figurine were discovered. They were carefully buried in a small hole of a house floor. An unbaked clay female and bull figurine was found on an oval clay receptacle over a lid. There was another female figurine inside the box which rested on a clay ring used to keep the figurine inside the box in standing position. The female figurine inside the box had pinched head and curved arms but pendant breasts which are indicative of fertility. The female figurine on the box is headless, has a flat body and short curved arms and the lower part seems to be incomplete. A blind hole is found in the abdomen of the figurine as well as the back of the bull. If a stick is inserted in both the Goddess sits on the back of the bull. This can be interpreted to be the beginning of the concept of 'Vahana' in Bramanical Pantheons later on. The headless Goddess stands very parallel to Goddess 'Vishira' (literally means without head) who is known to have nurtured child God Kartikeya and thus can be associated with child birth. In the surrounding area of Inamgaon even today figurines are made of wheat flour at some special occasion before the celebration starts they worshiped the God for success. They call this God Ganesha.

### **A Case Study from Mula River Basin**

In the remote forest of Mula basin, lies the legend and folklore which has been transferred from generations to generations. Regardless, all development and facilities that has reached to those places, the dwellers enjoy the simplicity and belief they are born and bought up with. The lush green forests, high hills, tall trees and abundant of wild games in the vicinity adds to the beauty of this valley. On the contrary, the obscure darkness engulfs the jungle after the sunset and brings to the mind of these innocent dwellers the fear from illusion in darkness and terror from the leopards, reptiles that can in seconds take away their lives. There comes the proximity for the belief on the supernatural that can protect them from any bad omen. The one who is believed to run the whole universe and pulsate the earth with life. The one great power that can protect human race from all misfortunes.



While our exploration in the right bank of Mula we observed that the religion moves around the mother goddess and she is considered to be the main deity of these communities. These goddess are mainly Kalamjai, Yedai, Waghjai, Yedu etc . The practice of dedicating forest to the mythological deities is in vogue from the ancient period. Several groves in Maharashtra are dedicated to ferocious deities such as Kalamjai, Kalubai, Navlaidevi, Jakuradevi etc. Local tribes protect these groves against all odds and disaster (Kulkarni and Kumboj 1999).

The Kalamjai temple is situated in Ghargaon, on the right bank of Mula, in Sangamner tehsil, in Ahmednagar district, 30km ahead of Alephata. The Kalamjai temple lies at a latitude N19°18' 80'' and longitude E 074°08' 662' and elevation of 648m from mean sea level. The name Kalamjai has been derived from two different words i.e. 'Kalam' and 'jai'. Kalam stands for 'Kadam' and 'jai' stands for 'mother'; the mother goddess who resides in *Kadam* tree. It is believed that mother goddess *Durga* resides in *Kadamba* forest and thus is called '*kadamba vana vasini*'. *Kadam* is a fragrant flowering tree. Its botanical name is *neolamarckia cadamba*. It grows in south East Asia. For thousands of years it holds cultural and religious importance for people in south and south East Asia. It is believed that the flowers blossom in this tree at the sound of monsoon thunder.

The temple of goddess Kalamjai has been carved out in a cave in the basalt flow. It is situated in the reserved forest of Ghargaon. A seasonal Kalamjai stream flows at a distance of 50 mtrs from the temple. The basaltic cave in the reserved forest of Ghargaon. The temple is located besides the pool formed due to waterfall and shows huge deposits of stalactites and stalagmites. The temple has been renovated from inside in modern period by fixing tiles. A new modern form of goddess *Durga* has been depicted on the wall along with several more modern pictures. There is a series of stone pieces and sculptures besmeared with red ochre, kept outside in the temple premises. The sculptures kept outside as well as inside the temple carved out on wall look significantly of a very early period. The sculptures kept outside have got weathered due to the exposure under the open sky.

The image of the goddess stands 2.5 feet high and 1.4 feet wide. There are 3 sets of circular depression in the sculpture at the position of her eyes, breast and head which measures 0.8cm deep and 2cm wide . Two pebbles of the same measurement is kept near the feet of the goddess. These two pebbles are placed in the set of any one of these three set of depression which gets struck in the sculpture temporarily due to the thick and sticky red ochre besmeared on it. It is believed that the devotee places his hands below these pebbles placed in the depression and if it falls in the right hand then the wish of the devotee gets accomplished. There is a lamp carved out of compact basalt kept lightened before the goddess. It is kept on a stand measuring 1.2 feet high and 4.2 cm broad. The lamp is 6.5cm in diameter and 3.5 cm thick. The dwellers worship the goddess on every Tuesday and Wednesday, and especially in the month of '*Ashadh*'. They dedicate according to Hindi calendar is believed to be the month of goddess and she is worshipped in this month with pomp and grandeur. She is the village deity of these tribes. They worship her before any social ceremony like marriage, child birth, and functions. They offer coconut, *pooranpoli*, hen, goat, flowers and ochre to the goddess. Sacrifice and oblation is made during harvest, for fine weather, before sowing grains and even in the period of illness and diseases. There is a dike pattern trending north–south direction from Ghargaon to Nasik. The tribes believe that those 7 feet broad dike mass to be the impression of the heavy wheels of *Pandavas* crossing this region while returning from south to Hastinapur. It is said that they halted at this place beside the waterfall for a night and carved out this cave temple over the night. But as soon as the dawn broke they left the outer platform unfinished and departed for their destination. These tribes believe in the concept of '*matrka*' group .They believe that different goddess work together for the welfare of their community. They believe that Tulzabhavani of Tulzpur and is being worshipped in these forest pockets are the sisters of Tulzabhavani and they together take care of these tribal communities. The '*matrka*' group comprising of seven mothers have also been mentioned in Shilappadikaram. The cult of '*sapta matr*' implies the worship of a group of seven mother goddess. There are some reference to this cult in *Rigvedic* and later Vedic texts. The idea of female energy (*sakti*) as the agent of creation led to the evolution of guardian spirits as cult goddess in most tribal societies (R.N.Nandi).

A similar practice to worship Kalamjai has been observed at the hamlet of Malin near Bhimashankar. Malin is a medium sized village located in Ambegaon taluka of Pune district. It is approachable by road from Ghodegaon, the



taluka head quarter. The village is situated in a hilly region at an altitude of about 2000 ft. The village has one gaathan(main settlement) and seven hamlets within the radius of about 4 k.m. namely Chinchevadi, Jhanjrevadi, Potevadi,Wundevadi, Pasarvadi, Lembhevadi and Koknevadi.

Varsubai is the tutelary deity of the village and Kalamjai is the second most important deity. Both the goddess are placed in the temple inside a sacred grove. This grove is located 3 km from the *gaathan* as in the case of Kalamjai at Gaathan. The temple in Malin is on the hill slope which lies closer to the two hamlets Koknevadi and Pasarvadi. The Kalamjai temple is bigger and better constructed than the Varsubai temple. Other deities in the temple are Vaghoba, Shiva and Ganesh. Other than this there are round stones beasmeared with ocher.

The Kalamjai deity is worshipped daily by the kokne priest who resides at Koknevadi. People come for boons on Tuesdays. Apart from regular worship the deitie is worshipped with pomp and grandeur by the peasants of Koknevadi and Chinchevadi during '*agor saat*' and '*diwal saat*'. There is an annual procession held at Varsubai temple when Kalamjai goddess is carried on '*palki*' to the Varsubai temple. This procession of Kalamjai is held by the people of Koknevadi. Kalamjai and Vagoba are the complementary to each other and are believed to be the forest deities. Before departing to the forest on annual hunting day the made members of the entire village seek their blessings from Kalamjai goddess. She is the clan deity of the people in Koknevadi.

The Kalamjai sacred grove is having thick vegetation in a better preserved form. One can see ample amount of flora and fauna at this place. Amongst the faunal heritage we have red squirrels, rabbits, monkeys and birds. Occasionally, panthers are also seen. Their taboos are very strict about any felling or looping in the forest, they even don't permit the collection of dried woods or leaves. Animal grazing is not allowed in the grove. The dwellers of Koknevadi make it particular that not a single drop of kerosene oil is carried in the grove. The temple lamps are lightened with the mustard oil. The thick vegetation at the grove traps large amount of ground water resulting in the perennial flow of water in Kalamjai stream.

These sacred groves are the only remnants of the original forest maintained in near climax condition in many parts of Maharashtra. They have been preserved throughout ages because of a wealth of conservation oriented cultural and religious tradition. The religious belief associated with the groves seems to relate to primitive cults, probably dating from the hunting gathering stage. The deity is generally a mother goddess, though it may also take the form of phallic worship sometimes. The deities are fiery spirits apt to cause serious harm to whoever offends them. The grove probably originated to protect some particularly rare species which had a function, may be as a medicinal plant. 'Kalamjai', the name which has been derived from kadam tree too hold a great medicinal importance. It can treat a range of diseases like gastropathy, fever, skin diseases, leprosy, wounds, heamorrhages etc. Probably, owing to these many values the tribes might have connected the name of the goddess to this tree. It is a general practice amongst tribes to conserve the plants and trees in their natural habitat and worship them as home of God and Goddess. The conservation of nature and environment through religious beliefs is popular amongst tribes and these preserved forest pockets are called 'Deorahi' or 'Deo- rahati' which means sacred groves (Kosambi 1962, Gadgil and Vartak 1976).The flora and fauna of these sacred groves are protected under taboos and sanction which provide limits to overexploitation (Lebbie and Guries 1995). Mahadeo kolis, collect dried woods after seeking permission from forest gods by a worship method called '*Kaul*'. If the rituals are not followed, it is believed that people may fall sick or die or be bitten by snakes. There are strong restrictions against the cutting of trees inside the religious forests preserved in Panshet water catchment area (Vartak and Gadgil 1981).

Conservation of sacred groves in India has ancient roots from Vedic period. In Vedic literatures, the term aranyaka means forest, where life of hermits was peaceful. Tapovan was a special place for meditation.Vrikshayurveda written by Parasar in c.400 B.C. is a full fledged treatie covering some basic aspects of plants. He says that Sahyadri hills have *Apranta Vana* spreading upto *Bhrgu-kaccha* (Nirpunage, Kulkarni1988). The inscriptions of Emperor Ashoka stand as a living example for the conservation of environment and biodiversity.



The sacred groves are always associated with ponds, streams, springs and river which serve as micro-watersheds. The water pool besides the Kalamjai temple is a good example of rain water harvesting. This pool is manually built to collect the rain water that falls just beside temple in rainy days. These sacred groves also help to trap the ground water which leads to the emergence of streams, as in both the cases, at Malign and ghargaon. The dike present in the Kalamjai sacred grove is quiet close to Kalamjai stream and a percolation tank. These dolerite dike trends nearly north-south from Ghargaon to Nasik. It is roughly 7 feet wide. The dolerite dikes to a great extent control the movement of groundwater and success of the well field area depends very much upon its location with reference to adjacent dykes. The thick extensive vesicular trap are favourable for artesian wells. The lower portion of the dike acts as a barrier to the ground water passage (Adyalkar and Mani). Probably, this character and advantage of the dikes was known to these tribal dwellers; so they attributed it to the legend of great epic.

Both at Ghargaon and Bhimashankar they revere Kalamjai goddess as the goddess residing in the sacred grove. We can see these groves connected with a water stream. The vegetation is thick with rich flora and fauna. Both the places show a primitive practice popular amongst the tribes of the particular region. But the practice of worshipping Kalamjai is the Malin village looks more primitive than that at Ghargaon. Here at Ghargaon the practice appears to be affected by the modern Hinduism. But this practice at Ghargaon reflects to be migrated from the Bhimashankar region to this place in the bygone days. The deity of Malin looks more primitive and unsculpterous than the one at Ghargaon which is comparatively sculptures. At Ghargaon the rituals appears to be mixed with Hinduism and *Saptamatri* concept of Hinduism, while at Malin the practice is still primitive and appears to be a true tribal practice.

A similar study conducted by D.D. Kosambi in the year 1962 has been mentioned in his book the Myth and Reality. Kosambi talks about the cult of Mahatoba and the shrine of Mahatoba on Vetat Tekdi. He said that the cult of Mahatoba came to this place along with herdsmen of Wakad where there is a temple to Mahatoba and his consort dating older than 1678 A.D. He gives a little description of Kalubai, calling her by the epithet of “the dark lady”. He says that she is represented all over Maharashtra by red daubed aniconic stones called tandula (shaped like a grain of rice), which do for any primitive deity without distinction. To these deities are also attached some stone kept in one corner in grove or quiet place near every village and smeared with red or black colour, as we have seen in both the cases at Ghargaon as well as Malin, that we came across at many places while surveying Mula Basin. These stones are generally regarded as the God of snakes and called as Mhasoba by the localities. Snakes are also important for farmers, thus hold importance. These snakes keep down the rat population thus protects their produce and agriculture. These deities generally demand animal sacrifice. The cult spots are rarely within a village, rather lie at a distance of at least half a kilometer as we have seen both at Ghargaon and Malin. Smearing of Goddess with *shindur* / ochre represents the blood of sacrificial victims. These victims were no doubt humans in bygone days according to Kosambi. He points out these features of the cult as primitive dating from the hunting gathering stage of the society.

### Result and discussion

Humanity has remained snuggled near mother Goddess for the last thirty five thousand years and remains an inseparable part of the world tradition even today. The abundance of female figurines cannot be ignored. She in some or the other form is worshipped all over the world. The female figurines have been found right from the upper Palaeolithic to chalcolithic age and throughout the historical period and we bow our head in front of this divinity even today. Mother Goddess worship in Mula river basin can be interpreted to have originated with the tribal beliefs and taboos. These practices are strongly connected with the environment according to our interpretation, as the name Kalamjai suggests. These Kadamba trees are only found in semi evergreen to tropical deciduous forests, the type of vegetation we have in mula basin.

The origin of the mother goddess worship is strongly rooted in nature and these practices are not new as these temples belong to a period which has a deep root in history. The antiquity of the temple can be interpreted from the reference of Shridhar Pandit in Pandavapratah Granth as he says that the temple was built by the Pandavas



while crossing this place, thus the temple was there before he wrote the book. The forms of the sculpture itself suggest that it is an old practice prevalent in the region from very ancient times. The usage of pebbles for fixing it at the depression of the eyes in the sculpture doesn't appear to be a recent practice instead an old one. Moreover, rishi Parashar talks about the presence of dense forest in shyadri region. Bhills and thakkars too are dwellers of this place from time immemorial and thus their practices are also ancient. The tribes find these forest patches to be their abode as it provides them with shelter, food and fodder. They connect it with the mother goddess deity as mothers are known to save, protect and nourish her child as these forest patches do to them. They believe that their mother goddess stay there with them always and protect them from all the danger and support them for life which is certainly filled up of challenges in such thick forests. These tribes should be accepted as the conservers of the forest patches as their myths and taboos help the forest patches as their myths and taboos help the forest patches to remain enacts.

### Conclusion

Archaeology is a subject which covers a wide range of study. It not only deals with the excavation and preservation of ancient artifacts but is also responsible to conserve and preserve the ancient living cultures. These spots at Ghargaon and other places in Mula are no doubt an old living tradition brought along with the tribes in the region. Thus, saving these tribes is to save our ethnicity and ancient culture that has been brought down by these people from generation to generation by preserving the old tradition in the form of taboos. Moreover, it is important to conserve these religious edifices so as to protect our heritage of past cultures. These spots are in highly vulnerable state and are losing its identity in time. The modern encroachment of renovation is stealing its originality and if not thought upon, in no time the living tradition with a symbolic icon will lose its identity and only the folklore will remain in the forest with no evidence to prove its authenticity.

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