

Discovery of Three New Gadhegals in Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra

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Abstract:

Gadhegals, also known as “ass-curse stones,” are unique sculptural artifacts primarily found in Maharashtra, with examples also documented in Goa and Gujarat. These stone pillars, often inscribed with legal or land grant texts, are characterized by a distinctive three-panel structure. The upper panel typically features symbols such as the sun and moon, denoting the permanence of the decree, while the lower panel depicts graphic imagery of bestiality, representing severe curses for violations.

This paper explores the iconography, historical significance, and regional variations of Gadhegals, with a focus on recent discoveries in Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra, and examines their role as territorial markers, legal instruments, and sacred objects of veneration.

Keywords: Gadhegal, Ratnagiri, Punas, Pawas, Gadadu Dev, Koldhe, Chavhata.

Introduction:

The Gadhegal represents a distinctive sculptural phenomenon predominantly associated with the regions of Maharashtra (Dhere, 1990), with additional examples documented in Goa (Tulpule, 1963) and a singular occurrence in Gujarat (Van Der Geer, 2008). These artifacts are dated to a period ranging from the Shilahara dynasty (1012 CE) to the later Adilshahi era (1651 CE). Characteristically, Gadhegals are large, flat, rectangular basalt steles embedded into the ground, often inscribed with text in the Devanagari script. Structurally, these steles are generally divided into three distinct panels. The uppermost panel typically features symbolic motifs, such as the sun and moon, which signify the perpetual validity of the decrees or grants inscribed on the stone. The central panel is primarily occupied by detailed inscriptions, often documenting land grants. The lower panel is particularly notable for its vivid and explicit imagery, usually depicting a human figure being forcibly engaged with a donkey. This imagery serves as a graphic warning of severe punishment for violating the laws, boundaries, or grants associated with the Gadhegal.

The term *Gadhegal* itself is derived from the Marathi words *gadhe* (donkey) and *gal* (stone). According to Prof. Arvind P. Jamkhedkar and V.V. Mirashi (1971), an alternative interpretation links *gal* to the Marathi term for a swear word or term of abuse, translating *Gadhegal* as “donkey-curse stone.” Mirashi further uses this interpretation to propose the English equivalent “ass-curse stone,” highlighting its role as a symbolic and legal deterrent. Gadhegals served not only as boundary markers but also as potent visual tools for reinforcing legal and territorial boundaries. Their striking iconography, particularly in the lower panel, conveyed a powerful warning against transgressions. Tulpule (1963) categorizes these steles into three primary types based on their structural and inscriptional features: (1) those combining both sculptural depictions and inscriptional descriptions, (2) those featuring only sculptural imagery

without text, and (3) those relying exclusively on inscriptions with no accompanying visual elements. This classification highlights the diverse communicative strategies employed by Gadhegals, whether through textual, symbolic, or combined approaches, thereby deepening our understanding of their multifaceted role in their historical and cultural context.

Previous Work:

The scholarly exploration of Gadhegals has been significantly advanced through the contributions of various researchers. Dhere (1990) provides a comprehensive analysis, interpreting the provocative imagery on the lowest panel as a symbolic form of censure. He suggests that the depiction may metaphorically represent the desecration of Mother Earth, conveying the severity of violations against sacred or legal boundaries.

Tulpule (1963), in his seminal work *Pracheen Marathi Koriv Lekh*, complements this interpretation by cataloging the diverse forms and linguistic intricacies of the inscriptions associated with the “ass-curse.” His study further identifies subtypes of Gadhegals, thereby offering a systematic understanding of their stylistic and functional variations.

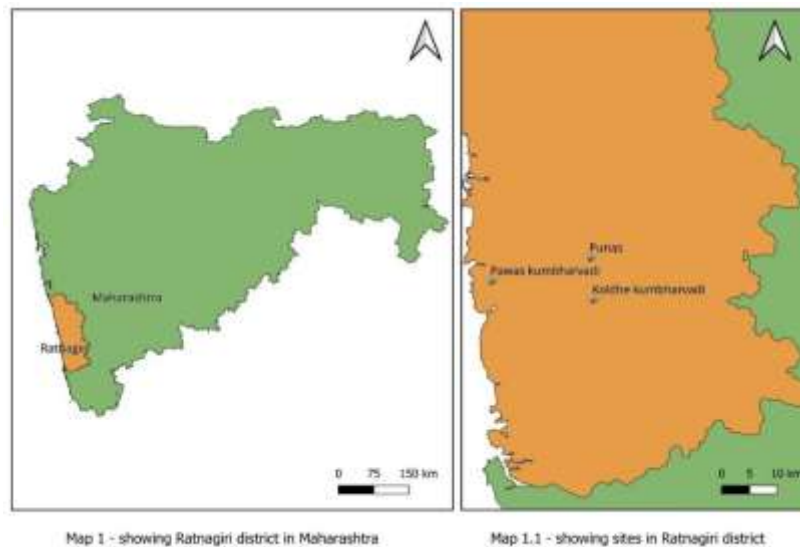
Khare expands the interpretative framework by associating the donkey imagery with the *vahana* (vehicle) of Goddess Sitaladevi, traditionally linked to pestilence and barrenness. This perspective positions Gadhegals as deific artifacts, with the “ass-curse” serving both as a divine order and a reminder of the consequences of failing to uphold sacred grants (Wirkud, 2024). Within this context, the curse functions allegorically, highlighting the moral and spiritual ramifications of transgressing divine or territorial laws. In contrast, Kurush F. Dalal, Siddharth Kale, and Rajesh Poojari (2012) argue that the Gadhegal imagery transcends its symbolic significance. They propose that its depiction likely had a pragmatic purpose, serving as a direct and stark deterrent to potential violators by emphasizing the physical, rather than purely divine, consequences of their actions. This perspective underscores the dual role of Gadhegals as both sacred markers and instruments of socio-legal enforcement.

Study Area:

Ratnagiri, located at 16.9944° N latitude and 73.3002° E longitude, spans an area of approximately 8,208 km² and has a population of 1,615,069. It is geographically the southernmost district of Maharashtra and is bordered by the Arabian Sea to the west, Sindhudurg district to the south, Raigad district to the north, and the districts of Satara, Sangli, and Kolhapur to the east.

The district experiences a tropical monsoon climate with abundant and consistent rainfall. The year is divided into four distinct seasons: summer (March to May), the southwest monsoon (June to September), the post-monsoon period (October to November), and winter (December to February). The proximity to the Arabian Sea contributes to high humidity levels, particularly during the monsoon, when the skies are predominantly overcast and winds are strong, blowing primarily from the west and southwest.

Ratnagiri comprises a narrow coastal strip bordered by the Arabian Sea to the west and the Sahyadri Hills to the east. Its geological composition includes Archaean and Gondwana formations, which are predominantly located in the southern half of the district. The northern region is characterized by extensive lava flows collectively referred to as the “Deccan Traps” (Ratnagiri District Gazetteer, 1962).



Map No. 1: Showing District and Location of Gadhegals

Research Methodology:

The research methodology employed in this study adopts a multidisciplinary framework, integrating archaeological, ethnographic, and geographical analyses to explore the significance of Gadhegals. A field survey is conducted across the study area to document the spatial distribution of Gadhegals, utilizing GPS technology to record precise coordinates and employing high-resolution imaging for detailed documentation of the artifacts' structural and iconographic features.

The iconographic analysis interprets the symbolic motifs, linking them to the socio-political and religious contexts of the period. Ethnographic research is undertaken through interviews and participant observation with local communities to document contemporary worship practices and understand the evolving cultural meanings of the Gadhegals. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are employed to map the spatial distribution of Gadhegals, highlighting their role as territorial markers and their contextual placement within village boundaries. Finally, the synthesis of these findings aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted roles of Gadhegals, not only as legal and territorial markers but also as sacred objects of veneration.

New Discovered Gadhegals:



Figure No. 1: Punas (Navalai Devi Temple)

The first Gadhegal is located in Punas village at coordinates N 16°90'69.55" and E 73°48'94.12". It is positioned outside the temples near the Tulsi Vrindavan of the village deity, Goddess Navalai (Fig. 1). This stele measures 16 inches in height, with a base width of 12 inches that narrows to 9 inches at the upper side. Although the stele is actively worshipped by the local community, the specific identity of the deity it represents remains unknown.

Distinctively, this Gadhegal features only symbolic curses carved onto its surface, unlike the other two examples in the region that incorporate additional elements such as a *kalasha*, crescent, and circle motifs. Made of basalt, the stele aligns with Tulpule's categorical distribution of Gadhegals, emphasizing sculptural imagery without accompanying textual inscriptions.

The second Gadhegal is located approximately 5 kilometers from Punas village, in the area known as Koldhe, at coordinates latitude N 16°50'7.39896" and longitude E 73°29'38.64372". It is situated beside the deity Chavhata within the Chavhata Temple, located in Kumbhargaon (Fig. 2). According to the temple's *pujari*, the current structure was constructed approximately 10–15 years ago, replacing an earlier *sahan* (an elevated stone platform traditionally used as a seat for the deity).

This Gadhegal, crafted from basalt, measures 22 inches in height and 12 inches in width. The stele features a distinct composition: its upper section displays a central *kalasha* flanked by a crescent on the right and a circle on the left. The lower panel consists of a square inset depicting a human figure sprawled on its back, with an equid featuring an erect phallus standing over it. The carvings exhibit significant weathering, indicative of age and prolonged exposure to environmental elements.



Figure 2: Koldhe (Kumbhargaon)

The third Gadhegal is located in Kumbharvadi, within Pawas village, at coordinates latitude N 16°52'3.53" and longitude E 73°19'22.03". Known locally as Gadadu Dev, it is venerated as a deity. Between the 12th and 19th centuries, *Gadadu* was a common name for *Gadhegal* in Maharashtra (Khare). Historically, the stele was placed beneath a banyan tree, but it now occupies a more prominent position where regular *puja* and *aarti* are performed every Thursday. Additionally, an annual festival

dedicated to Gadadu Dev is celebrated on the third day following the Padava festival, accompanied by local entertainment.

The sculpture is carved from basalt and features a triangular shape, with a base width of 16 inches tapering toward a height of 17 inches. The upper portion of the stele displays a crescent, beneath which is a circle. The lower section contains vivid and explicit imagery depicting a human figure being forcibly engaged with a donkey (Fig. 3). Notably, this Gadhegal lacks any inscriptions, symbolic *kalasha*, or the inset box typical of similar steles.



Figure 3: Gadadu Dev Mandir Kumbharvadi Pawas

Discussion And Conclusion:

Gadhegals, also known as “ass-curse stones,” are notable historical artifacts found across Maharashtra (Wirkud, 2013, 2024; Dalal et al., 2012; Khandekar, 2013; Mokashi, 2014; Dalal, 2015). Primarily serving as land grant charters, these stones are characterized by their unique and often provocative imagery, typically depicting a woman being sexually assaulted by a donkey. This graphic representation functioned as a symbolic marker of the socio-political and religious sanctions associated with violations of land agreements.

The study of Gadhegals offers significant insights into medieval socio-economic structures, land use practices, and political authority. The Gadhegal at Diveagar, dated to 1254 CE, provides valuable information about the administrative and cultural influence of the Northern Shilahara dynasty. Similarly, the Gadhegal from Askhi village near Alibag underscores the territorial extent of Shilahara rule, highlighting their dominance across northern and southern Maharashtra.

Most Gadhegals are located within temple precincts and continue to be objects of worship. In Koldhe and Punas villages, local communities worship the Gadhegals despite being unaware of the specific deity they represent. In contrast, the residents of Pawas village conduct regular rituals and annual festivals venerating the Gadhegal as a local deity.

Geographically, these Gadhegals often coincide with village boundaries. For instance, the Gadhegal at Gadadu Temple marks the boundary between Pawas and Kurdhe villages, while the Gadhegal at

Kumbhargaoon in Koldhe village lies on the boundary between Koldhe and Kot villages. These boundary placements suggest an original function as territorial markers, later integrated into local religious practices. Over time, the ritualistic and worshipful significance of these Gadhegals evolved, likely as a result of their association with boundary crossings and communal interactions.

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