

Kokna Tribe Tradition of Memorials in Stones

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Abstract:

The Kokna tribe, heavily populated across regions of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli, maintains a distinct ancestral-worship tradition centred around creating wooden and stone memorial pillars known locally as 'Chira,' 'Patli,' Virkhamb or 'Virgal'. These vibrant structures act as living shrines to honour the deceased, often illustrating specific causes of death-such as snakebites or animal attacks-alongside symbolic motifs like the sun, moon, and tiger deities. Interestingly, these multi-generational family pillars are carved by expert local artisans and include depictions of both deceased members, who are coloured with vermilion or paint, and living members, who remain uncoloured. Erected through elaborate community rituals involving traditional offerings and sacrifices, this practice represents an evolution of ancient Hero stone traditions. Today, however, the custom is facing a decline as contemporary worship practices gradually shift.

Keywords: Kokna tribe, 'Chira (memorial stones), carved wood memorial, ancestors, pillars

The Kokna, Kokni, and Kukna tribes are an important tribe that ranks 15th in terms of population among the 705 tribes in the country. This tribe ranks 5th out of 45 tribes in Maharashtra after Bhil, Gond, Koli Mahadev, and Warli, and respectively ranks 7th out of 28 tribes in Gujarat and second out of 7 tribes in Dadra and Nagar Haveli. The population of this tribe is about 11 lakhs according to the 2011 census.

The Kokna tribe is mainly settled in the districts of Nashik, Palghar, Thane, Dhule, Nandurbar, Valsad, Navsari, Dang, Tapi, Narmada, Surat, and Nagar Haveli in the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli. Apart from the Koknas, this region is home to Bhils, Koli Mahadev, Dhor Koli, Malhar Koli, Warli, Katkari, Pawara, Mavchi, Dhodia, Nayakada, Dubala, Rathwa and many other tribal communities. The largest number of Koknas is located in the Nashik district of Maharashtra. The Koknas are a major tribe in this region.

Kokna tribe

The Kokna tribe is mentioned in the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency (1880). These people migrated from the Konkan region (south Konkan) to Thane (Palghar), Nashik, Dhule districts of Maharashtra and some parts of Valsad, Navsari and Dang in Gujarat, and they still live in the districts of Gujarat. In 1396-1408 AD, the drought of Durgadevi devastated the Konkan region, and people migrated to Thane and Nashik. The Nashik District Gazetteer mentions the Koknas as migrants from Thane (Gazetteers of Bombay Presidency, Vol. XVI. Nasik), while the Thane District Gazetteer mentions that they were

brought here from Ratnagiri. They were originally from the Ratnagiri area. It is mentioned in the Bharatiya Sanskriti Kosha that they were brought from the Ratnagiri area to protect the Gambhirgad fort in Jawhar taluka.

They migrated to Gujarat around 1400 AD during the famous drought of Durgadevi. Although their original ancestors are said to be from present-day Ratnagiri, historians write that they originally came from the South Konkan region of Goa and Karwar. If we consider the language and cultural value of this tribe, it can be said that they migrated from the former Goa and Karwar regions and came here about 1400 years ago. According to anthropologists, the ancestors of the Kokna tribe were the primary inhabitants of the Konkan region, and it is from their ancient dialects that the present-day Konkani language has evolved. In the Nashik district gazetteer, Koknas are mentioned as immigrants from Thane who spread into Dang and up the Western Sahyadri ranges. They were known as Kokani Kunbis.

A majority of the tribes of Maharashtra prefer using large rocks or stones to craft the tombstones for the deceased members of their families and community. While these memorials are referred to as Shinolis and Urskals by the Gond tribe, they are called 'Vir' by the tribes in Western Maharashtra. The memorial stones built by the Gond community are generally made from tall and flat stones. Interestingly, the nephew of a deceased person plays a key role in the making of these memorials. Memorial stones of varied sizes sculpted out of large rocks are seen throughout the tribal belt in the Nashik district. The Koli Mahadev, Thakar, Warli and Kokna tribes, meanwhile, refer to their memorial stone as Vir or Virgal.

These Virs go up to four to six feet in height and have a rounded top, which is symbolic of the Sun God. These memorial sculptures host a variety of designs, including human faces, the Sun and Moon Gods sitting in between lotuses, brave men riding horses with swords in their hands, among others. A closer look at these sculptures shows the artist's intent to make the dedicatory tombstone original and lively, and the faces of the characters carved in the stone reflect the power and heroism of the tribe.

In tribal areas, these stone statues are monuments. Monuments are more visible than idols of gods and goddesses. The practice of erecting monuments in memory of the dead has been in tribal areas since the Middle Ages. Memorial stones of the dead can be seen as far back as the 11th-12th centuries. It is impossible to say today who the artists were. Most of the monuments are on stone.

The Kokna tribe has its own traditions; the Kokna tribe preserves its sacred ancestral-worship practice through the creation of wooden and stone memorial pillars, locally known as 'Shila', 'Chira', 'Patli', or 'Virgal'. These memorial stones act as living shrines, erected to honour deceased ancestors, warriors, or individuals who died protecting their community. The tradition is rooted in a highly distinct set of customs and iconographic features. Depending on the region and the status of the deceased, the Kokna people use both carved wooden pillars and chiselled stone pillars.

They bury the dead and erect square stone pillars; in recent times, they burn the bodies and bury small dead children. Generally, the cremation rites are the same for men and women. In the case of a child, the father carries the body in his arms to bury it. Both the practices of cremation and burial of the deceased are found in Kokna. If a person dies at night, a wake is kept till morning, which is called 'Ratava Ghalane'. The death ceremony is known as 'Mayat'. Relatives and villagers bathe the deceased in

lukewarm water, prepared without mixing cold water with hot water. After that, they take the deceased to the veranda (Osari) and a stone mortar and apply turmeric to the deceased. (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency. Vol. IX. Part-1. 1901). Kokna people believe that every person's life is anointed with turmeric twice, once at the time of marriage and the second time at the time of death. The tradition of applying turmeric to the deceased is done from head to feet, and in wedding traditions, the turmeric is applied from the feet to the head, and then they put on new clothes. The Koknas cook rice 'Sambol or Naivedya' for the deceased.

While a person who dies of snakebite or is killed by a tiger is cremated (bury), the cremation of a person killed by a tiger follows a specific ritual. In the case of a person killed by a tiger, the part of the body that was not eaten by the tiger is placed near a tree trunk and burned. On the day of 'Ash Immersion', a wheat flour effigy is made to represent the person, which is eaten by the tiger and the effigy is burned on the bank of a river.

Chiras are seen as stones erected in memory of deceased ancestors. The Chiras are 8 to 10 feet high. The Chiras of the entire family of the Kokna tribals are erected in one stone. After the death of a family member, the image is painted with vermilion in memory of that person. The Chiras features depict a husband and wife, and also brave men seated on horseback. These special memorial stones are in Ghagbari village on the road to Surgana in Nashik district. These memorial stones are for the worship of the ancestors of the Kokna tribe.



(Chira on Ghagbari village at Vani-Surgana (Nashik) road)

Everyone who goes from Nashik to Surgana road, near Ghagbari village, is forced to stop by the roadside Chira. This group of Chira reveals the world of Kokna tribals. These memorial pillars are called Virgali (Hero stone). Virgali are mainly erected for brave warriors. However, this Chira found among the Kokna tribals is a pillar of the genealogy of the memory of both their ancestors and themselves. The stories of the rituals, culture, customs, and traditions of the tribal community are hidden in this pillar. This pillar also reveals a unique custom after death. While looking at this memorial pillar in Ghagbari village, the question and curiosity arise in the mind as to why exactly it was erected. These are not Virgali; they are Chira. Chira means a stone erected in memory of the deceased ancestors. On the Chira, the image of each man and woman in the family is carved. The people who are alive are also carved in

the Chira. There are different types of carvings in the group of carvings in Ghagbari. Among them is a carving of the tiger god. Generally, there are carvings that reveal the reasons for which a person died. There are also carvings with couples. Such carvings mean that all the people of a family are shown on that carving. The tallest carving is about 10-12 feet high. The figure on the Chira is distinguished by the application of vermilion. While the uncoloured carvings represent living individuals, coloured carvings represent who passed away. However, the event of applying colour does not take place just anytime.

Stone Chiras is found in the villages of Ghagbari, Borgaon, Shinde, Umbarpada, Sarad in Surgana; Dalwat, Shingashi, Tirhal, Ganore, Chanakapur, Bordaiwat, Nanduri, Chankapur and Mohandari in Kalvan taluka; Babhulne, Savarpada, Vaghamba, Aliyabad, Jaad, Golwad, Borate, Gavhanepada, Bordaiwat in Satana taluka; Chausale village in Dindori taluka; Bhortipada, Gultare, Pinjarzadi, Navapada, Vitave, Pangan, Walhve, Mogarpada, Jhirnipada, Dhawlivahir, Hanumantpada, Barapada, Shivpada, Laghadwal (Gadwal) in Sakri taluka; Khandbara, Chaupale and almost all the villages in Nandurbar and Navapur talukas; and also in the Kokna tribe of the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli villages. Some of them are found in the same place, while some are seen separately on the farm embankment.



(Memorial stone like Khandbara, Nandurabar)

Earlier, the Chira or Patli was decorated with vermilion. Today's only symbolic vermilion is applied. But now the practice of applying vermilion has stopped, and the Patli is decorated with various colours. Suppose a young boy or a servant has died, his Chira or Patli is shown wearing coloured suit pants. If a soldier or a policeman has died, he is shown dressed in the same way.



(Varnish colour stone monument Shivpada, Tal. Sakri, Dhule)

The specific carvings are sculpted to depict the cause of death, so that the next generation knows how their ancestor died. If a person dies in an accident while travelling in a vehicle or bullock cart, the bullock cart or that vehicle is displayed in his Patli. Suppose a person dies due to a snakebite or hanging, a snake is drawn on the Patli or the hanging is displayed. Even if Patil or Chira is painted with colours, the vermilion mark is still applied.

Another interesting custom is that they keep a cot or bed near the burial ground to give peace to the soul, and the person's name is written on it. If more than one person dies in an accident or sudden death, the names of all those people are engraved on Patli.



(The Pawar family has a teak wooden memorial at Aпти village, Dadra and Nagar Haveli)

In some areas, especially in Dadra and Nagar Haveli, there is a practice of making wooden monuments in memory of the deceased. The Pawar family in this village has monuments made of teak carved wood in memory of the deceased. These wooden memorials are easily damaged because the wood is vulnerable to the surrounding nature. It is believed that the wishes of the deceased are fulfilled as wooden memorials rot due to insect infestation.



(Carved wood memorial at Khandbara, Nandurbar)



(The deceased belonged to the Vadhu clan of Toranvera Tal. Khergam (Dist. Navsari, Gujrat) and identified as men in white clothes and women in red clothes)

Some of the Chiras are carved on carved wood pillars. These are the living Chiras and memorial stones of Koknas. These memorials are carved on wood or stone with white or coloured cloth wrapped or tied around them. It is as if the cloth is protecting all parts of the ancestors from the sun, wind and rain. Sometimes the pillars have wooden carved figures, on which the cause of death and the tiger god as the main deity are recorded. Some pillars have more than two or three figures carved on them and some have figures of all the family members.



(Female memorial stone in Babhulane Village, Satana Taluka)

In the above memorials, the female memorials that have been varnished are no longer in this world, meaning they are dead women. On the contrary, the colourless monuments have been carved and prepared in advance, and the name of the first woman in the family to die will be duly inscribed with vermilion and included among the dead. This is a practice found among the Kokna tribe of carving memorial stones before death.



(Chira at Shamgavhan village, Dang District, people who died due to snakebite)

The lower part of all three memorial stones on the above incision has a picture of a snake, or Cobra. This means that these men and women died due to snakebite. The dead are buried in the ground on the village boundary, and such memorial stones are erected there, and the name of the clan is written on it.



(In memory of the livestock lost to tiger attack, Waghdev, Shamgavhan, Dang)

Waghdev is a primaeval tiger god, known as the protector of the forest, worshipped by several tribal communities across India for ages. While grazing animals in the forest or cutting down wood, these deities are remembered for protection from tiger attacks. Since tribal communities depend on forests for necessary resources, food, and firewood, they worship tigers and offer sacrificial offerings to them. Even if a tiger attacks a villager, the devotees do not turn hostile toward their deity. In fact, the villagers built a pillar near the site of the conflict point in an effort to pacify the tiger.

Although the two above-mentioned carvings or stones appear to be tiger gods at first sight, they are not tiger gods. When the villagers take their livestock to the forest for grazing, and sometimes the livestock is attacked or eaten by tigers or wild animals, the owner of the animals worships the memorial image of the tiger gods and erects it on the village boundary to prevent such accidents from happening again. The name of the family is written on that carving, like here, the tiger gods of the Pawar family and the Rathod family. In this image too, the sun and moon are depicted at the top, the tiger in the middle and below it, peacocks, snakes and scorpions.



(while worshipping at Hanumantpada in Sakri taluka)

On Chaitra Purnima, the Patli or Chira of the deceased is worshipped. On the day of Holi, the Patli or Chira of a person who has died during the year is painted, or if a new Chira or Patli is to be installed, a

worship program is held in the traditional manner, and the Chira is taken out and installed through the village.

Devotion or work

To protect the ancestral spirits from the harsh elements, the tribe wraps or ties white or colored cloth around the sculptures carved into the stone. Rituals are periodically performed, especially during auspicious days or community festivals, to pay respects to the spirits as guardian figures of the clan.



(Stone monument tradition of the Kokna tribe in the village of Bordaiwat, Taluka Kalvan)

To represent the deceased ancestors, the Kokna tribe makes Tak (an embossing of an image of the deceased mounted on a horse along with the name on a thick, arch-shaped, pentagonal metal sheet). The male is called 'Vir' and the female is called 'Supali'. The Tak is brought from a goldsmith, wrapped in cloth and hung high until the 'Kaj' (Devotion) ceremony. Wealthy Kokna families erect a stone Chira for the deceased ancestors. Some Kokna families in villages in the Dang and Vansda areas of Gujarat keep a stone or Chira in the name of the deceased ancestors. All these ceremonies are called 'Kaj or Devkarya'. If four or five members of a large clan die in a year and the householder has sufficient funds, they decide to hold a joint 'Kaj' ceremony and invite relatives to join.

Chira is a kind of long-term memorial of two to three generations of a family. This Chira is carved on a large stone with the name of the noble in the family, along with pictures of his wife, children, daughter-in-law and their grandchildren on horseback. In the name of the one who dies, they perform the ceremony of Avasar (ritual of bringing the wind of the dead into the body or Chira) and decorate the Chira with vermilion. The Chira of the living person is left without vermilion. The Chira of every deceased person in the family are carved with the name and decorated with vermilion.



(Tak or silver image of dead ancestors)

Only a wealthy person can build a Chira for a deceased person. The mason was paid money or, earlier, a bull to carve a figure in stone or wood. The carvings show the deceased man or woman with their family, including children. It is a prominent person carved on a horse. This ceremony is performed in the month of Chaitra. The pillar (Chira) is placed in a pit, in which five types of grains, namely Nagli (finger millet), Rice, Varai (barnyard millet), Urad (black gram), Sava (Little Millet) and a paisa are kept. Then the Bhagat chants some Mantras, applies vermilion to the Chira, pours a drop of liquor and sacrifices a goat. Then meat and liquor are served to all the assembled guests. The Bhagat is given a few rupees as a gift. Monuments of different sizes carved on stone are mostly seen in Nashik district.

The entire area from Borgaon, Hatgad, Mohapada to Bubli in Surgana taluka, Khirad in Kalvan taluka, Hatgad via Dalwat, Chankapur, Shingashi, Kanashi, Bordaiwat, Kalvan-Abhona, Nanduri-Kalvan is full of such monuments. At each place, there are five to fifty stone monuments with many types of human figures carved on them. There are also many such monuments in the Mokhada area of Palghar. Many such monuments of various figures are also found on the Jawhar-Mokhada and Khandala roads. This sequence of erecting memorial stones is also seen in Dang district of Gujarat. There are Chiras at Jamlapada (Gadhvi), Galkund, Pimpri in Dang.

Although it is possible to say who the exact artisans are, the tribals themselves do not do the engraving, hammering or carving work on the stone. This intricate work is done by Beldars or Mahars from the Chira area. Beldars from the Yeola-Nandgaon area of Nashik still go to Surgana and Peint for this work. From the point of view of art production, the Mahars are the leading caste in Maharashtra. Due to the social constraints of untouchability, all kinds of artisans of their own were created during that time. In rural areas, carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, potters, flute players, and Tamashgirs (performer) etc., are essential. Artists belong to this caste.

Stone memorials of Waghdev are mostly seen on the village border in Kalvan and Surgana. Wooden memorials of Waghdev are everywhere, and carvings are also seen in stone and wood. Every village has a shrine of Waghdev. The wooden or stone memorial of Waghdev is flat in shape. On the upper part, the sun and moon are carved as witnesses. In the middle part, a tiger with its tail raised, and below it, a snake, aka Cobra, a scorpion, and a peacock are carved.



(Waghdev in Carved wood and stone form)

In some villages, the image of these Chiras has been installed in the central place, building a Platform. Now, the practice of erecting such Chiras seems to have been abandoned by the Konkani tribals. In that sense, this art is declining. Now the worship of these Chiras has changed to the place of memorials (Images), which can be considered a part of the change.

Although today there are no Virgalis (Hero stones) of Kokna, Kokni, Kukna, it would be apt to say that the tradition of making Chiras or Patli among these tribes has evolved from Virgalis. There are many places in Nashik district called Virgali, which are called Virgal in Marathi. Stones of heroes' memorials (Virgalis) are found there. It is well known that this method of erecting stones with carvings in this way for the memorials of heroes is considered a speciality of Karnataka in India. Another thing is that the history of making Chiras is seen only from the Karnataka or Kannada region. Whereas, since the tribals who call themselves Kokna, Kokni, Kukna originally came from there (Goa, Karwar, i.e., South Konkani), it would not be wrong to say that Chiras or Patli replaced Hero stone here.

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