

## Fish and Fisheries in Marathi Folklore: A Cultural Study

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**Abstract:** Folklore is a living tradition that reflects diverse features of human life and cognition. Being deeply rooted in people's minds and continuing for generations, folklore gives solid input for studying culture. For centuries, the most familiar aquatic animal, the fish, has had a room in mythology, fairy tales, and folklore. From the Manu-Matsya myth of Shatapatha Brahmana to the present-day tribal songs, the fish constantly appears as an aquatic creature, a rescuer and a friend irrespective of the geographical regions and its physical availability. The present research focuses on studying the versatile representations of fish in Marathi folklore and attempts to understand the facets of fishing in the folk culture of Maharashtra.

### Introduction

The administrative state of Maharashtra covers the western and central peninsular provinces of India with a total geographical area of 3,07,713 km<sup>2</sup> and comprises three broad physical divisions from west to east: the Konkan coast; the Western Ghats, or the Sahyadri; and the Deccan/Maharashtra Plateau. The ranges of the Western Ghats separate the Konkan coast from the rest of the state and give birth to several mighty rivers that nourish both the western and eastern regions. Maharashtra's wetland area is 10,14,522 hectares (National Wetland Atlas: Maharashtra 2010: 19-22). Maharashtra is one of India's eight major littoral states, with a coastline of 720 km, and exploits to its advantage the fishing resources of the shallow waters of the Arabian Sea continental shelf (Dikshit 1986: 211). Inland fishing is carried out in rivers like Godavari, Krishna, Bhima, Koyna, Narmada, Tapi and their tributaries, as well as both natural and human-made reservoirs of the Deccan plateau. The geographical distribution of water bodies is highlighted by the association of aboriginal fishing communities like Koli, Bhoi, Gabati, Daldi, Dhivar, and tribes like Warli, Thakur, Kokana, Katkari, Bhil and Gond who carry out fishing with indigenous methods. Traces of their fishing practises can be seen reflected in their material culture, diet, belief patterns, and folklore. The fish has been



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surrounded by several beliefs and lore due to its connection with water, making it a sign of life and profusion. The present ethnographic study attempts to mark the depiction of fish and fishing in Marathi folklore with the range of connotations involved.

## **Materials and Methods**

The present research article studies the people's viewpoint towards fishing as well as fish as a symbolic entity through published folklore concerning the state language, Marathi, with its regional dialects, which transcends castes and communities. Scholarly compilations since the nineteenth century include works by Frere (1870), Enthoven (1915, 1923), and Date (1929), along with sporadic research articles published in '*Indian Antiquary*', '*Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*' and '*Bombay Anthropological Society*' as well. Marathi-English dictionaries like Molesworth (1857), Date and Karve (1933, 1935, 1938) and proverb collections of Manwaring (1899), Deshpande Tarlekar (1900) and Bhide (1910) carry information about prevailing fisheries and associated vocabulary, as well as versatile usage of the term 'fish' in everyday life. Systematic collections of later stages incorporate studies focusing on specific aspects of folk culture by Babar (1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1972, 1973a, 1973b, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1985), Gare and Jog (1986), Gare (2000, 2002), Nerurkar (1988), Chorghade (2002), Mande (2003), Pagare (2005), Lohkare (2006), Adhav (2009), Bhaingunde (2009), Bangar (2010), Kavathekar (2012), Gavali (2013), and Chaudhari (2018). They all present a wide canvas of folklore collections that provide passing indications of fish in the regional and/or communal context. The study of a fishing community's folk culture can be credited to Kanekar (1963) and Punekar (1959). The present article incorporates new ethnographic data collected through personal communications during fieldwork.

Instead of studying the folklore conventionally with established motif patterns, only the mentions of fish or allied features (fisherman, trap, fish-motif) are documented. It was difficult to assign a specific expression to a particular group since some instances could be fitted into more than one group, e.g., a trap and fish consumption. Systematically documented data with contributory information was segregated into two main groups: fisheries and fish representations. Detailed interpretations of each group's respective elements are followed by analysis. The article concludes by commenting on the regional features of fisheries and revolving folk beliefs that peep into Marathi folklore (Fig. 1).

## **Fisheries**

Folklore, especially from the coastal region, provides plenty of references regarding fishermen, their routines, fishing practices and material culture. Also, fish consumption is an essential element of this category. Fishing communities and their associated water sources have been portrayed in folklore frequently. Mainly, Koli folklore portrays the sea variedly as they live along the coast and ultimately depend on fishing. In Maharashtra, there are approximately twenty-seven Koli communities, which are further subdivided into Son Kolis, Vaiti Kolis, and Mangela Kolis due to their occupation of fishing in both sea and freshwater (Ghurye 1957: 1–15). Though many of them are into other professions, the words 'Koli' and 'fisherman' are used as synonymous terms in Marathi

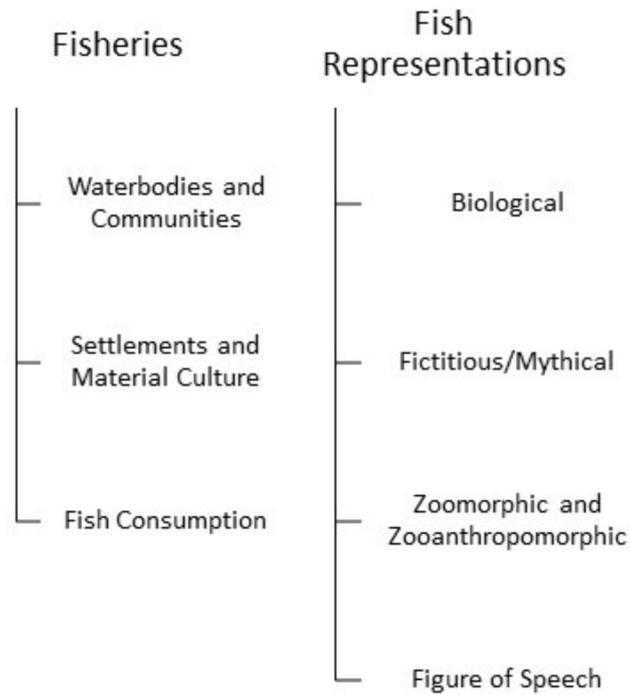


Fig. 1: Fish and fisheries related expressions in folklore

(Molesworth 1857: 188; Date and Karve 1933: 811; Harad and Joglekar 2017: 121). The importance of the sea to Kolis is emphasised in the lines below,

We sailors are kids of the sea  
 The sea is our shelter  
 We catch fish with *dol* nets  
 Our ladies sell those in the markets

(Bhairgunde 2009: 134-35)

Since marine fishing is their sole means of living, the Son Kolis consider themselves kids of the sea. Traditionally, the duties on the water are assigned to men and those on the shore to women. A Warli myth underlines these traditional responsibilities of the Koli community. The stanza below narrates how a giant fish swallowed a raft made of dried pumpkins carrying a wedding party. God Mahadeva himself killed the fish, but he called Kolis when it came to cutting. It draws attention to the conventional practises of fishing and fish-cutting carried out by the Kolis.

A raft made of dried pumpkins was swallowed by a giant fish  
 The giant fish has been killed by the god Mahadeva  
 On his order, the Koli folks cut and opened the giant fish

(Kavathekar 2012: 225-228)

Another Warli ballad describes how a certain Koli (Mangela) community has evolved. According to them, the gods created the earth and life; then, they took a bath in the sea. Fish in the sea harassed them. Since there were no fishermen, they had grown in abundance. Thus, the gods created Mangela Koli, and afterwards, the fishing began (Babar 1969: 259). Interestingly, the Warli and Mangela Koli communities share the same geographical region, i.e., the northwest part of the Konkan, mainly the Thane and Palghar districts. Thus, the folklore mentions their neighbourhood. In the traditional village economy, professions are hereditary, in which the entire family participates in one way or the other. Hence, when a father asks his daughter's choice about her husband's livelihood, the wise girl understands that if she gets married to a Dhivar, she should not be ashamed of catching fish.

Oh, dear daughter,  
In which home should I get you married?  
Oh father, let me get married to a Dhivar  
What are the chores at a Dhivara's house?  
Why should I get ashamed of catching fish?

(Babar 1988: 107-08)

A *bhalari* song, sung mainly by farmers from Western Maharashtra, indicates when a male is not available; the females of this community continue the work.

While the Koli (husband) sleeps, his Kolin (wife) awakes  
Starts fishing....

(Babar 1964b: 98)

It has to be noted that this song belongs to Western Maharashtra, where female members of the Koli community can take part in freshwater fishing. So it is not possible in the case of coastal communities since they are extensive operations for days with a crew; men go on a boat, catch fish, and after coming back, handover all the stuff to women. Then sorting, cleaning, and selling those fish in the market is a woman's job. This is a routine work distribution and is being followed habitually. Thus, labour division in the case of fishing can be observed. A Bhil woman narrates her feelings about fishing. This song's situation is that her brother gets arrested, the sole breadwinner. She says she will not lose hope; being a Bhil, fishing is in her genes. She shall earn by fishing and feeding her family. She shall rescue her brother with that money too. Therefore, fishing is portrayed as nature's gift, an eventual source of income when there is no other way.

I am a Bhil woman, oh mother  
Shall catch fish, sell them, sell them oh mother  
Shall sell them, get the money, get the money oh mother

(Mhaske 2002: 217-18)

The cooperation of two different workers in the context of fisheries can also be seen. A Bhoi catches fish, for which he uses a net prepared by the jute man of the village;

Who catches such a fish	The Bhoi of our village
Let's go and see a Bhoi	Bhoi hid himself behind his net
Who prepares such a net	The juteman of our village

(Babar 1964a: 322)

This is ultimately a part of *gavagada*, an age-old village economy where one's final product is another's raw material. The variety of riverine, coastal, and deep-sea nets, as well as traps and their functioning are well reflected in the folklore. Casting a net in the river/creek at the time of low tide is called as "To hold a block" (Chaudhari 2018: 283). The following song belongs to the interiors underlines it;

Such a small fish moving in the water  
Ladies, let's go to hold a block

(Babar 1985: 524)

Unlike deep-sea fisheries, inland fishing is not widely considered a chief income source. Though monsoon fishing done in streams, rivulets, and rice fields gives surplus income to a large number of people, in other seasons it provides food (Harad 2019: 719-39). Many inland traps can be made with simple, accessible raw materials, and anyone can manage at least one meal if they patiently spend 2-3 hours in the nearby water body. Accordingly, a proverb dedicated to hunter-fishers says, "Fish for the one who sits, and a hare for the one who roams". This means that the one who is tolerant, wise, and prepared to patiently wait beside the water, fixing his traps cleverly, will get a fish, while the one who is willing to wander tirelessly in the jungles will trap a hare (Harad 2021: 48). Patience is much needed; if hurried, you will not be able to achieve the desired target: "Hasty catch, gives frog instead of a fish" (Deshpande Tarlekar 1900: 32). Along with regular meanings for the word fish-net, dictionaries give alternates as 'A term of anger or contempt for a flimsy and open-textured cloth' (Molesworth 1857: 650). Two widespread idioms about net and hook, like "A fish caught in a net" and "A fish caught in a hook", are variously used to refer to prey or an achieved target (Molesworth 1857: 650; Harad 2021: 47). Another ingeniously simple and commonly used inland fishing technique is stupefying, locally referred to as *maja* means "To sedate". In this practice, certain plants' bark, fruits, and pods are pounded, mixed, and diluted into pond water to intoxicate fish. While the literal meaning of *maja* in Marathi is intoxication (Molesworth 1857: 641), the term is used here for a simple but clever technique for catching fish by using plant extracts to unnerve the fish first and make them easy to trap (Harad 2021: 47). A detailed description of this method is seen in a ballad sung by the Kokana tribe; some tribe leader 'Umaju Naik' (no resemblance with the freedom fighter Umaji Naik) drunk and on his order, his people went to the jungle. They collected poisonous barks, pounded, mixed in the pond, and many fish died with its effect (Fig. 2).

Umaju Naik got drunk  
Ordered his people  
Three hundred and three people went to the jungle, went to the hills  
Collected (sedative) barks from the hills  
Three hundred and three barks were taken to the homes

Three hundred and three houses pounded the barks  
Pounded the barks and fish began to die

(Adhav 2009: 174-75)

The process of collecting these half-dead fish in a cloth is called '*bagging*', '*straining*' or '*shela*' (a cloth). Another song tells us how a pregnant lady tempts to eat fish, and her husband catches it with a '*shela*' (a cloth) for her (Fig. 3).

Pregnant for the first time, see her cravings  
The husband catches fish with a *shela*

(Babar 1968: 193)



Fig. 2: Pounding poisonous fruits to sedate fish



Fig. 3: Fishing with cloth (After Harad 2019)

Koli songs are famous for their live depictions of fishing, fish markets, and settlements. Comparatively, folklore from other parts of Maharashtra lacks details about inland fishing communities. The Kolis identify themselves by the name of their Koliwada (Koli settlement). A famous song mentions Koli women from different settlements.

Lady from Varali, oh lady from Varali,  
You have a basket of Saranga (pomfret) on your head

(Babar 1964b: 204)

Here, a Koli woman from Varli Koliwada is called '*Varlikarin*'; in this way, terms like '*Vesavkarin*', '*Kulabekarin*', '*Shivarikarin*', and '*Dharavkarin*' are used for Vesave, Kulaba, Shiv, and Dharavi Koliwadadas, respectively. They are said to carry the baskets of 'Saranga' (a variety of Pomfret), 'Khengat', 'Shivala/Shivada', 'Khara', etc., on their heads. Another song refers to the infrastructural problems of these Koli settlements. A father asks his daughter where she wishes to get married; she refuses every proposal, telling the concerns of each Koliwada. The pathway to Kharadanda Koliwada is rocky, while Uttana must be facing scarcity of water (Bhairgunde 2009: 167).

Folklore refers to people's love for fish. A story narrates that a Koli used to fish every day for the king's supply; after some years, he handed over the charge to his son. The next day, the son went fishing but could not find a single fish. A goddess on a nearby tree offered a helping hand on the condition of half share. He accepted and got a huge crop. This episode continued. The goddess was so fond of fish that she woke him up at midnight for fishing. He gave her fish for fifty-two consecutive nights, so she gave him the strength of fifty-two elephants (Babar 1982: 84-93). There are instances of fish being specially cooked for guests. In a song from North Maharashtra, a lady says she will cook a particular fish caught from the river Girna for her brother, who seldom visits.

A fish from Girna (river)      I cook with love  
Brother is the guest              Not usual you know

(Pagare 2005: 187)

At another place, a neighbour asks why you are pounding spices; the lady answers, 'My brother has come to see me. Bhoi people have gone fishing (I shall cook fish for my brother)' (Suryavanshi 1980: 240). The mythical story of Queen Changuna depicts how she prepares fish for the ascetic's meal. Since he was her honourable guest, she asked what he would prefer to eat for lunch. He answers '*mangaramasa*' – a big fish. So she goes to the Bhoiwada – the lane of the Bhoi community (freshwater fishermen) – and requests a Bhoi to get her a *mangaramasa*. Bhoi catches one and hand it over to Changuna.

What would you prefer for the lunch, Sir?  
We'll prefer *mangaramasa* (a big fish)  
Changuna left from her abode, went places  
She went to the wada (lane) of Bhois  
Oh brother Bhoi, oh brother Bhoi  
Be kind to me and get me a *mangaramasa*

*mangaramasa* was caught, *mangaramasa* was caught  
Handed over to Changuna.

(Karve 1939-40: 85-86)

At the beginning of the monsoon, many fish species like catfishes, loaches, garfish, eels, etc., migrate upward from riverine channels for breeding. They are typically called *Valaganiche mase* or *Chadhniche mase* (upstream fish). This monsoon fishing accounts for a sizable portion of inland fisheries in the Western Ghats. On those days, local youth gather along the streams for fishing. A Warli song describes this situation and people's desire for these fish as,

The rains of <i>Mriga</i> month began	The farms are full of water
<i>Mirgule</i> fish started climbing	A sister went to her brother
Oh brother, go catch them	Oh sister, please don't take their name
Sister got furious	Sister came back home

(Kavathekar 2012: 207)

*Mruga*, the first constellation of the monsoon, started showering. The small streams flowing through rice fields are rejuvenated. Small-sized *Mirgule* fish are seen climbing upstream. A sister went to her brother's home and insisted on these monsoon fish. For some reason, the brother denies it; the enraged sister leaves in no time.

The climbed fishes reach into the rice fields, ponds and breed; the juveniles begin descending to the more significant rivers, creeks and sea at the end of the monsoon. The late monsoon fishing mainly targets these young ones. They are called *Utaraniche mase* (downstream fish). Such inland fishing continues until the respective body of water dries; it gives an easy source of nutrition and a comfy culinary for farmers and tribes while busy cultivating. Songs sung by them on farms describe fish food, and some naughty songs make fun of vegetarian people, especially Brahmanas, for whom eating fish is taboo. A characteristic song belongs to the Warli community, which narrates a funny story of how a Brahman sees a fish while performing his rituals in a lake or river. It further describes how this lured Brahman prepares a thread trap with his *yajnyopavita*, and he catches the fish, cuts it, cooks it, and finally eats it (Kavathekar 2012: 155). Similar songs have been documented from other parts of the state sung by Thakur, Kokana, Bhil, Mahadev Koli tribes and farmers (Babar 1968; Nerurkar 1988: 12; Gare 2000: 213; Mhaske 2002: 180; Lohkare 2006: 361-62; Kambale 2015: 81).

## Fish Representations

Though fishing and fish consumption are prevailing all over the state, one can hardly find resources and versatility as rich as those on the Konkan coast. To begin with the definition of the term 'fish' in Marathi, we see many variations in expressions and descriptions;

Fish – *n. masa m. dim.*, *masali* or *masoli f.*, *matsya m. matca m.*, *jalcara m.*  
Incant or free phraseol. *panashenga f. bandari jinnasa m.*

(Molesworth 1847: 264)

He also gives certain types as Bombil (Bombay duck), Halawa (Black Pomfret), Shingada (Catfish), Kend, Khirad, Gada (Dolphin), Ghogara, Cinvane, Danku (Dwarf Murrel), Nivatya (Mud skipper), Boya (Mullet), Sukata, and Maral (Murrels). These titles and descriptions of different fish can be found in coastal folk literature. A song from South Konkan portrays the marriage of fish species Tarali (Sardine) and Bangada (Mackerel) in which other fishes handle all the wedding responsibilities; this extensive song continues referring to various fish species such as Mudadushi, Isavana, Karli (Silver bar), Vagati (Ribbon fish), Pedave (*Sardinella fimbriata*), Kalava, etc. along with local wedding rituals. The fish abundance of South Konkan can be traced through this song (Gavali 2013: 185-86). An old proverb says, "Three stones in the Dhodakara's (a fish) head" (Date 1932-50: 1764; Gavali 2013: 366). A specific fish, Dhodakara or Dhodya (probably croaker), has three stones in its head. These are otoliths, which are white stones of calcium carbonate that develop in the inner ear; they help ichthyoarchaeologists estimate the age of the fish and their habitat (Joglekar 2015: 100). Despite literary meaning, such proverbs furnish with fish anatomy (Harad 2021: 48).

In the case of edible fish, the initial differentiation is between marine fish and freshwater fish, locally called *khari macchi* (saltwater fish) and *godhi macchi* (freshwater fish), respectively. Another variation is using fresh fish and sun-dried, salted fish. The surplus crop is often sun-dried and stored over the year. During the monsoon, when both fresh fish and vegetables are scarce, these *sukata* serve the purpose of filling the plates of especially farmers and tribes. Drying fish and selling them gives fishermen a surplus income. They are sold in bulk quantities in 'monsoon markets' or exchanged with rice, and sometimes beans and spices, where farmers can store the yearly stock of dried fish and fisher folk obtain the whole year's rice and pulses. Both these systems are prevalent in Konkan, all handled by Koli women. A song from Dist. Palghar (North Konkan) shows the business tricks of this side-occupation. A Mangela fisherwoman is very smart. She mixes dried Nerala fish with dried Bombay duck (they look alike) and doubles her income! (Fig. 4)

Mangela Koli's wife is wise.

She mixes dried Nerala with dried Bombay duck

She turns her hundred (rupees) into two hundred (rupees)

(Chaudhari 2018: 155-56)

When it comes to fish, one cannot escape the fish odour. Again, there is a variation between the dead fish's odour and the dried fish - *sukata*'s smell. A folk tale narrates that once, Ganga and Parvati quarrelled about who is being loved most by Shiva. Parvati cursed and beat Ganga; in return, Ganga seized all the water sources since she was the queen of water. Parvati had no option other than to patch up with her. So she went to apologise; knowing this, Ganga spread dead fishes on Parvati's way to tease her (Babar 1974: 161-64). Dead fish stink badly, whereas dried fish's smell does not disturb fish-lovers. Once, a few Kolani (fisherwomen) met their Malani friends (garland-makers). The garland makers' house was fragrant with flowers, but the fisherwomen could not sleep, missing the familiar fishy smell at their own houses. Finally, they got up, sprinkled water on their baskets of dried fish, and slept peacefully only after the fish began stinking (R. Jadhav, personal communication, November 21, 2015).



Fig. 4: Ladies bartering fish with rice

Mythological stories get fused with folklore in the flow of narration; fish can be seen appearing in such notions. In the legend of goddess Renuka, she would prepare an earthen pot every day and, without firing, use it to carry water for her husband-Sage Jamadagni, due to her sanctity. Once, she gets disturbed by seeing the Citrarath Gandharva with his wife at the lake, and her austerity gets spoiled, owing to which her pot breaks down; later, she had to face the consequent anger and curse from Jamadagni. A folk account narrates her seeing a fish pair in intercourse and getting excited (Babar 1974: 591). Though the fish itself is not considered sacred or bears any mythical connotation, it plays a vital role in the legend. The concept of a saviour fish, being a friend and a guide, rescues mankind from the great deluge that prevails in almost all cultures worldwide. A Bhili version of this legend narrates that a woman used to feed the fish in the river every day. Hence, the queen-fish Ro was pleased with her and told her that the great deluge would soon happen. It also advised her to prepare a chest and enter it with her husband (in other versions, her brother) and some food. So she did; after the deluge, God found this chest and the couple. She told the god that 'Ro' fish advised them to do so. While verifying, initially, the fish denied it but later accepted it. Hence, God cut its tongue (Naik 1956: 297; Sheorey 1973: 94-96). The divinity aspect attached to the fish is multiple-layered. Due to the first incarnation of Vishnu, the legendary birth of Matsyendranatha, many beliefs are connected to the fish and subsequently reflected in folklore. This devotional song narrates how the sage Matsyendranatha was born. It narrates a legend according to which the sperm of the Sun fell into the sand of the riverbank and were swallowed by a female fish. It then gave birth to the sage. Fish is thus considered auspicious.

The sperms of god Sun fell in the sand  
 Swallowed by a female fish playing in the water  
 Sage Macchindranatha took birth from that fish's womb

(Babar 1965: 797)

Some fish species are totems for tribes; they are not eaten, but they appear in songs and tales. In a Warli song of death ritual, all the sacred things like the sun-moon, sea, deities and a specific *Bhingar* fish from the sea are saluted initially (Babar 1964b: 386; Gare and Jog 1986: 22-23; Kavathekar 2012: 196-197). Reserving sacred ponds in rivers is a common practice all over India; these 'sacred sites' are mainly developed and preserved by local communities (Dandekar 2013). At such places, fish are considered sacred and fed and fostered. The pilgrims of Pandharapur also go to Alandi and Dehu; both places are famous for their sacred fish. People feed them popcorn, puffed rice and sweets devotedly.

With mothers and sisters, let's go to Alandi.  
 I shall feed a feast to the fish of river Indrayani

(Babar 1965: 767)

After Pandhari, lets go to Alandi  
 We'll offer a sack of sugar to the fish of river Indrayani

(Babar 1965: 660)

In the former stanza, a lady wishes to offer food, while in the next, a sack of sugar to the sacred fish in the river Indrayani. Often, these sacred fish are locally called '*magaramasa*' (pl. '*magaramase*') or '*mangaramasa*' (pl. '*mangaramase*'), whose description and context are wide-ranging. It is usually fantasised as a big fish, probably 3-4 feet long; sometimes the crocodile is also referred to as the *magaramasa*. However, it can be guessed to be Mahseer (*Tor* spp.) as Mahseer has achieved the status of 'sacred' and is still worshipped at many fish sanctuaries all over the country (Gupta et al. 2016: 244-249). This endangered species was once commonly found in nearly all rivers. No wonder it appears in many folk songs, shrouded in mystery. The story of a poor but lazy girl, Bharo, tells us how she became rich with the help of these supernatural fish. Bharo keeps saying that she would be a queen on one *damadi* (1/24 part of an *ana* – negligible amount). Hearing this, a prince marries her and leaves her alone on a ship with no food but only one *damadi*. After starving for a day, Bharo sees a fisherman. At her request, he gets her nuts-puffed rice of that one *damadi*. They all fell into the water by accident, and *magaramasas* flocked to eat them. Afterwards, they all go to the shore and vomit gold coins. This way, the girl becomes rich (D'Penha 1897: 337-41). In a song, a lady uses this auspicious fish as a metaphor for her unalloyed clan. She praises her parents by saying, "I belong to a good family, like a pure breed of *magaramasa*".

On the bank of river Chandrabhaga, a *magaramasa* breeds  
 Similarly, my parents gave me birth

(Babar 1967: 285)

But it seems that *magaramasa* is not always a blessed entity; it is mischievous too. A song describes how it steals a bride's vessel; this newly-wed girl went to fetch water from the river, and her pot was taken away by a *magaramasa*. Here, the bride might blame this fish for her fault.

A new bride went to the river  
*Magaramasa* took away her pot

(Babar 1988: 376)

Fish-shaped toys, luxury goods and toiletries have been in vogue since the historic period. Among other utilitarian objects, quern-mullers and handmills show fish symbols representing wealth and prosperity. Folklore gives examples of such objects as boxes, nut-crackers, and combs. *Kunku* or vermilion is an integral part of a married woman's life, and there are many descriptions of the vermilion container, commonly called '*karanda*' in Marathi. A married girl is happy to see the gift sent by her mother. She says, "From a faraway place, my mother has sent me a cloth for a blouse and a fish-shaped vermilion container."

A blouse piece and a fish containing vermilion  
Loving mother sent from a long distance

(Babar 1967: 82)

In another song, this lady praises her mother-in-law, saying she has a fish (probably the knob) on her vermilion container, and both of them are so good to each other that they proudly display it.

Dear mother-in-law, you have a fish on your vermilion container  
We both are proud owners of it.

(Babar 1967: 347)

*Masoli* is a preferred toe ornament of married women from almost all castes and strata of the state, and thus appear frequently in the folklore. It is even imagined to be worn by goddesses. An Ahirani song (North Maharashtra) describes the jewellery of goddess Kanbai.

My goddess Kanbai has so many ornaments  
She likes to wear golden ornaments  
She wears todas, anklets, and masolya (toe rings) on her feet.

(Pagare 2005: 102)

Another folk song mentions an ear-ornament, *masebali*. It mentions various ear-ornaments as *bugadya* (made of pearls), *ghosabalya* (tangled from hair) and *masebalya*-bejewelled by precious and semiprecious stones (Sovani 1988: 150). A fish-shaped armlet is mentioned in another song (Babar 1973b: 383-85). Fish are believed to be auspicious and a sign of fertility. A fish in the form of earrings or a pendant is put on the kids, especially boys (to let them continue the family with many children in the future). A

song mentions a fish-struck *mudi* (probably a pendant) being lost by a child; the child is very special (hence the fish-shaped pendant) (Fig. 5).

The child holds	A colourful stick
It went on babbling	Lost the <i>mudi</i> (pendant)
What <i>mudi</i> is made of?	<i>Mudi</i> is made of fish
How is the child begotten?	The child is begotten by vow

(Babar 1973b: 11)

Compared to the fish motif, zooanthropomorphic forms are rare. Vishnu's *matsyavatara* has a mythological context; nonetheless, mermaid or similar entities are not observed in Marathi folklore. Only one story is narrated about a half-fish, half-man figure. A small boy leaves in search of Dharma. He meets a strange man with a human head and a fish body on the seashore. He is so because of his father's curse. This zooanthropomorphic creature takes the boy to the temple of Dharma on his back and guides him through what to do. Then he comes back to take the boy after twelve years. In the end, this creature gets rid of his curse and achieves a complete body of fish. He gives his wealth to the boy (Babar 1964b: 360-67).

The smallest weight used by goldsmiths was known as *masa*; it was equal to four *anas* (Date and Karve 1938: 2480). However, its appearance is uncertain. A proverb suggests the minor importance of this tiniest weight, as, "A *masa*-weight Khandoba, twenty *anna*-weight his dog" (Manwaring 1899: 218). It means the image of God Khandoba (here, master) is weighed a *masa* – one or probably four *anas*, whereas his dog (here, servant) is weighed twenty *anas*. Khandoba is associated with a dog; thus, the idiom suggests that sometimes the inferior has to be given more importance than the master. '*Tolamasa*' is a term used for a frail person. The appearance of fish, its biological characteristics, and movements in the water make it a versatile figure of speech.

A fish in the water is faster than its cradle  
My younger brother is well-read than his father

(Babar 1967: 180-81)



Fig. 5: Toe rings 'Masolya'

As a fish is faster than its life-support, i.e., water (fish is believed to be the child of water), my brother is more educated and quicker than my father.

The metaphorical usage of fish often indicates pranks between boys and girls. A *bhalari* song narrates what happens when a Koli girl goes to a river. She went to fetch water, and fish teased her; now what will she do? Here, the fish might indicate her lover and his mischief. Since the girl is Koli, fish-her living appears inevitably.

A Koli girl went to fetch water, the jasmine blossoms  
The fishes gave her a strike; now what happens?

(Kambale 2015: 104)

Such images sometimes turn crude; an Agari (North Konkan) folk song describes *dol* nets cast in the creeks in which small and big Shingale fish (*Mystus seenghala*) are caught. The narrator describes those fish metaphorically as female chests (Bangar 2010: 130-31). Sensuality is a part of folk songs that express inner feelings and lower the routine burdens of strenuous activities on land and water. These colourful songs demonstrate several fish metaphors. One of them is praying to the gods to sanctify them with a hundred fish baskets every day. Another Koli song prays to the god to bless them with heaps of pearls (fish).

Oh god, Khandoba, bless me.  
Let the heap of pearls (fishes) arrive into my boat

(Babar 1985: 849-50)

## **Concluding Remarks**

The roots of animal symbolism can be traced to both animism and totemism, and this desideratum of primitive thinking lingers in cultures with a long heritage, such as India. Formal and symbolic representation of animal form has continued over centuries' (Gorakshakar 1987: 56). The present article attempted to study both freshwater and coastal fisheries, fish consumption and people's viewpoint towards fish through folklore, with special reference to Maharashtra. Though fishing and fish consumption are prevailing all over the state, one can hardly find resources and versatility as rich as those of the Konkan coast. The Konkan is a land of fisheries; the rich shoreline and wide network of rivers, connecting bays, lagoons, and marshes, provide ample scope for fishing throughout the year. Since fishing is widely practised by various ethnic groups, being solely dependent on it (especially Koli), and the significant population is fish-sustaining, one can find several references to their natural and socio-cultural ecology. The regional folklore vividly depicts tangible fish species, facets of fishing and fish metaphors that can be called fishlore purely, remembering the value of fish in their lives. While we can find passing references in the other parts. Being a part of the regular diet and prevalent seasonal fishing, fish peeps in tribal folklore, myths and rituals as well. The monsoon gives them an opportunity for additional income generation through fishing, as rivers and brooks are rejuvenated and supply abundant fish (Harad 2021: 53). Some farmers' songs too depict fish-human interaction owing to their indulgence in seasonal fishing and fish consumption. Many inland fishing methods are operated by

women and youth; additionally, women take an active part in riverine/lake fishing and handle the marketing of marine fisheries. Thus, one can find descriptions of gender equality and the independent personality of women in the context of fishing.

The rest of the references variedly speak about fish sanctuaries, fictitious fish, omens, fish-shaped objects, etc. Fish symbolising sanctity, underwater treasure, progeny, and wealth are expressed through the mentions of sacred fish, ladies' ornaments and children's amulets. A sort of enigmatic aura around the fish is aptly reflected in these expressions. The creative and elusive depiction of sacred fish endowed with divinity lacks anatomical details, in contrast to those that prominently appear in coastal and tribal folklore, despite being a familiar entity and regular diet. Folklore describes a wide range of its symbolic functions, from a veiled asset in some places to employment directly related to status in others.

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