
Recently Reported *Sikotara Mata* Temple at Vadnagar and *Diva Dandi* from Vadgam – Khambhat

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Abstract: The excavation at Vadnagar reported Indo-Pacific glass beads, extensive use of marine shells for manufacturing of shell objects and Torpedo sherds. These indicate long-distance maritime trade network. In this context, evidence of *Sikotara Mata* temple at Vadnagar and finding of *Diva-Dandi* from Ralaj and Vadgam has shed new light over the maritime connections along the western coast of ancient India.

Keywords: *Sikotara Mata* Temple, Vadnagar, Maritime Link, *Diva Dandi*, Khambhat, Vadgam, Socotra

Introduction

While excavating Lothal eminent archaeologist S. R. Rao brought to notice evidence of a strong tradition of worshipping a Sea-Goddess. The original seat of the Goddess was the warehouse mound over-looking the dock. The stone in worship representing the Sea-Goddess was invoked to protect the sailors from the dangers of the sea (Rao, 1979, 21). This goddess is locally known as *Vahanvati Mata/Sikotara Mata*. Later, hypothesis stated that there was some connection of *Sikotara Mata* with the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden, a possibility which might be worth exploring.

Recent excavations at Vadnagar brought to light a continuous human occupation of over 2500 years. While excavating an area just outside the fortification wall during field season 2020-21, a veneering wall (exterior of the fort wall) was found severely damaged due to modern day open-drain activities. In this trench an opening in the fort wall was found datable to pre-Solanki era (Period IV). This opening was closed in subsequent periods for reasons unknown. However, during excavation, an interesting finding of a small shrine belonging to Goddess *Sikotara Mata* came to light. This small shrine was found right in front of the barred opening (Figure 1).

Sikotara Mata, is worshipped as a sea-faring goddess, by several communities in Gujarat who engage in maritime trade and make offerings to her before venturing out

into the sea. The term *Sikotara* is especially noteworthy since it is believed that this name was derived from the island of Socotra.



Figure 1: Sikotara Mata temple, Vadnagar

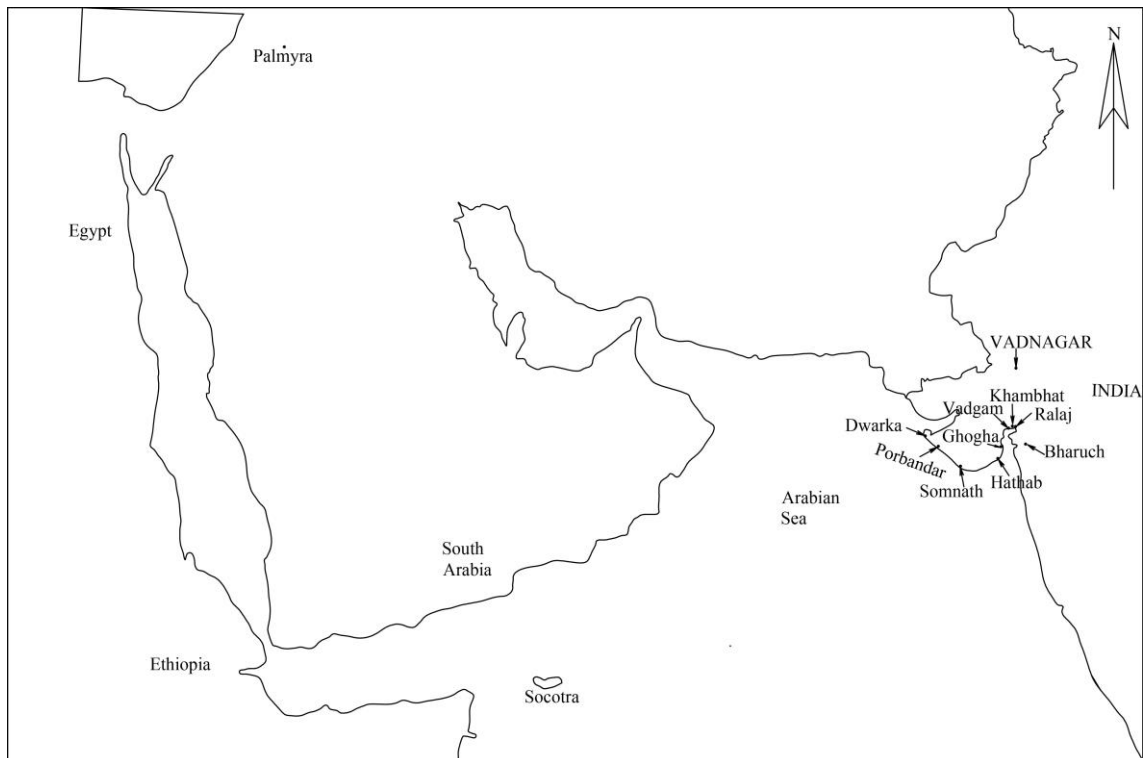


Figure 2: Geographical location of Socotra and ports on Gujarat coast, India (After Strauch)

Socotra or Soqotra is a Yemeni island in the Indian Ocean to the east of the Horn of Africa. It is a continental fragment that was separated from mainland Africa during the breakup of Gondwana supercontinent in Miocene period (Sarkar, Personal communication). For nearly 2000 years this small island was an important halting station for Indian seafarers, especially from Gujarat, on the maritime trading route from India to East Africa and the Middle East. Evidence for this are abundant in the Hoq cave inscriptions on the sea cliffs of Socotra Island. Inscriptions from the area known as Ras Howlef refer to the Gujarati people as *navikas* (sailors). At least two inscriptions reported from Hoq cave mentions sailors/merchants from Bharuch and one from the Port of Hathab near Bhavnagar (Figure 2). On the Indian mainland, sailors constructed temples of *Sikotara Mata* all along the seacoasts of Gujarat and even in some inland cities. Through passage of time the *Sikotara Mata* goddess took the form of *Ambe* (Durga) but the vehicle of this goddess remained as a boat; and she continued to be symbol of navigation. (Figure 3)



Figure 3: Sikotara Mata, modern depiction

Maritime Link

The *Sikotara Mata* temple at Vadnagar exists near the entrance of the ancient city, but its location in front of the ancient entry-gate suggests that probably the seafarers used to bring marine shells to Vadnagar for praying and worshipping before entering or after leaving the town. Finding this temple at Vadnagar, an inland city, has opened new

dimensions about maritime trade and its connection with Vadnagar. This has made the study of the Goddess *Sikotara Mata* in relation with maritime trade noteworthy and essential. Here it is important to note that some of the inscriptions in Gujarat language also mention the term, '*Vaniya*'; (trader class in Gujarat) and Vadnagar was classified as a wealthy merchant town in medieval times. It is said to have been one of the two golden wings of Ahmedabad (Lokhandwala, 1965).

The island of Socotra came into limelight when an expedition in December 2000 under Socotra Karst Project (SKP) discovered in one of the caves, (cave Hoq), a large corpus of epigraphical and archaeological remains. More than 200 inscriptions and drawings left by Indian travelers in the Hoq cave provided valuable information on the early history of India and its role in the intercontinental trade networks that connected the subcontinent with the regions further west. According to the inscriptional evidence, traders from Western India, South Arabia, Ethiopia, Egypt and Palmyra were personally present at Socotra Island. They must have stayed in the various caves in the Island. However, it is in the Hoq cave that we find many inscriptions in Brahmi, Kharoshti as well as Gujarat script. The number of inscriptions in this cave show that the majority of visitors came from India (193 epigraphs). Only 26 texts can be attributed to non-Indians (11 South Arabian, 8 Aksumite, 2 South Arabian or Aksumite, 3 Greek, 1 Bactrian-Brahmi, 1 Palmyrene). The inscriptions and drawings discovered in the Hoq cave bear witness to the activities of sea-traders of the Western Indian Ocean between the 1st century CE and 6th century CE (Strauch 2012). Further Gujarati inscriptions reported from Ras Howlef indicates that trade continued till 17th century CE.

Five inscriptions in Gujarati language reported from Ras Howlef, northern coast of Socotra datable to 17th and the 18th century mention that traders and merchants of various castes and communities visited Socotra. The Gujarati colloquial name of this island is mentioned in four inscriptions (Strauch 2012, pp. 413-431):

Sri sakatara

Sri sikotara

Sri sakotara

As mentioned above the five Gujarati inscription discovered from Ras Howlef at Socotra Island mention about voyages that started from Ghogha in a particular month and its return journey.

In the year 2002, a salvage archaeological expedition was carried out at Ghogha, Bhavnagar District. This expedition reported interesting findings of massive jars at the foundation of a Mosque at Ghogha. Three massive jars of about 1.5 meters in height were retrieved from there. On close observation of associate findings of the porcelain sherds, these storage jars were dated to approximately 16th – 17th century CE. These jars were probably used to store grains since the name of the place, where the storage jars were found is known as '*Danapeth*'. It is interesting to note that a *Sikotara Mata* temple is also located on the seacoast of Ghogha as reported from Ralaj, Vadgam and

Somnath. Thus, the report of finding a *Sikotara Mata* temple at Vadnagar along with temples from the port towns seeks attention to the fact that there were international connections at inland sites involved in manufacturing trade goods, and that these artefacts were traded long distances to various foreign nations via the port towns along the western coast.

A recent visit to *Sikotara mata* temples at Ralaj and Vadgam (Khambhat) brought to notice an interesting finding. Khambhat is an ancient coastal town reflected in ancient texts as an active port town from 9th -16th c CE. Out of the seven *Sikotara Mata* temples found on the western coast of Khambhat Gulf (Gaur et.al. 2020, 31-36), two temples, one at Vadgam and the other at Ralaj are noteworthy for the present study.

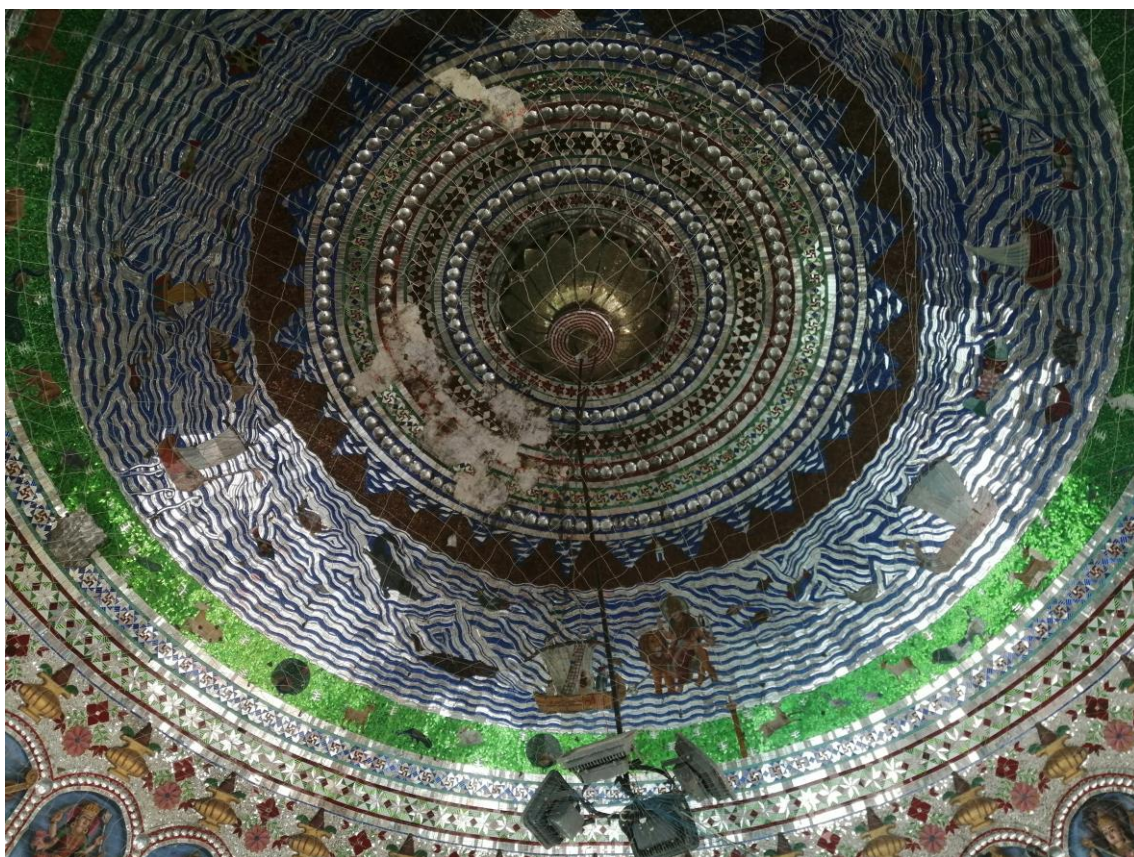


Figure 4: Dome, interior decorated with variety of vessels, Ralaj

Ralaj is 7 kms south-east of Khambhat and Vadgam is 15 kms south-west of Khambhat. The *Sikotara Mata* temple at Ralaj is on the seacoast (Figure 4). However, at Vadgam the *Sikotara Mata* temple is situated on the estuary of Sabarmati River. The walls of this temple of *Sikotara Mata* at Vadgam at some point in the past, (now no longer visible due to renovations) mentioned names of sailors of Bharuch, Kavi, and Devan who visited the temple on particular days to worship goddess on specific occasions. One of the writing reads “*The fishermen and boat owners of Kavi – named Rachhod Sona, Manga Bhikha, Jivan Nana, Bhagwan Asha came to this temple to bow down to Sikotar*” (Chandervaker, 1963). The practice of lettering names over the walls are very much

similar to writing names reported from the Hoq cave at Socotra indicating continuity of such tradition.



Figure 5: Metal casing Diva-Dandi, Ralaj

While visiting both the temples at Khambat, a very important clue regarding maritime trade came to light - *Diva Dandi*. *Diva Dandi* or in other words a pole to hold a lamp (diya/diva) is a wooden pole that was erected behind the sanctum of the temple. These *Diva Dandi*'s warrant special mention with regard to maritime trade. The wooden pole or *Diva Dandi* at Ralaj is completely encased in metal to prevent any identification of its features. A plaque in black stone below the *Diva Dandi* mentions that this *Diva Dandi* is 250 – 300 years old and that it was used as a light house (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 6: Mentioning about antiquity of Diva-Dandi and its usage, metal casing Diva-Dandi at the back

The wooden *Diva Dandi* reported from *Sikotara Mata* temple at Vadgam is heavily damaged and displaced from its original location due to heavy storm. However, one can easily distinguish its features (Figure 7). There are two parts of a *Diva Dandi*, one is a pole (*Dandi*) and other one is square bracket resting over the top of the pole, used to hold a lamp or flags. At present the pole is lying over the ground on the left side of the temple. It measures around 9 mts in length. However it is damaged, therefore if the damaged part is also taken in calculation then the pole would be around 13 mts in total length. This pole is round in shape with square facets at the upper sections of the pole. The upper section is faceted in order to fix a square bracket on the upper part of the *Diva Dandi*. This upper part is made of sturdy wooden logs fastened in place by cross-bars over the lower part of the pole, and tightened with the help of nuts and bolts. The

interesting part of this square bracket is that it has eight square perforations on the edges (Figure 8). These perforations must have been used to erect colourful flags over the bracket so that it would be visible by the ships far away at sea during day-light. At night a lamp would be lit to guide the ships coming on to the shore.



Figure 7: Diva-Dandi, Vadgam



Figure 8: Bracket of Diva-Dandi, Vadgam

While co-relating the *Diva Dandi* from other areas, an ancient structure, circular in shape and tapering upward was observed at Mul Dwarka (Kodinar). This is made of well-dressed limestone blocks. The shape and placement at the highest point on the coast suggests the possible use of this structure as a lighthouse. This lighthouse, locally known as *Diva Dandi* (Gujarati word for lighthouse), is 4 mts high and 2 mts in diameter. The construction pattern suggests a possible date between the 12th– 15th century CE. This is a solid structure and the top portion is flat with a few stones displaced due to installation of a modern flag. The elevation of the top portion of the structure from high water line is about 10 mts (33 ft) (Gaur, 2010). As per Gaur, the height of a lighthouse equipped with wick oil lamp as reported from Kolkata, Gopalpur, and Kodinar is approximately 4.25 m, 16.4 m and 9/10 mts respectively. A lamp at this height is visible to ships out in the sea from a distance of 3-4 kms, 15 kms, and 4-5kms respectively.

Conclusion

Overall, the picture that emerges is that Gujarat's sea coast was active in long-distance sea faring trade from early periods as can be gleaned from the presence of *Diva Dandi's* in various port towns. And as a mark of respect for the sea and for the protection of sailors/merchants during sea voyage, a tradition of offering prayers had become

known. Socotra, a major halting station might be an inspiration for lending its name to a newly formed goddess *Sikotara Mata*.

As Vadnagar was a major manufacturing centre of shell objects for which marine shells were brought from Dwarka area – Bet-Shankhodhara, Pindara and Nageshwar etc., there is possibility of offering prayers to *Sikotara Mata* by the people who were involved in marine shell procurement. Evidence of wooden *Diva-Dandi* from Ralaj and Vadgam can be identified as light-houses of ancient period. As the time progress, stone-built lighthouses started to emerge. These show clear evidence of sea trade and link between inland cities and sea ports of western coast of Ancient India.

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