

ANURAG MALLICK AND PRIYA GANAPATHY VISIT KONKAN'S DELIGHTFUL HOMESTAYS TO EXPLORE MALVANI CUISINE, THE MANGO TRAIL, SAWANTWADI'S ARTISTIC HERITAGE, A BURMESE PALACE IN RATNAGIRI, A TEMPLE BUILT BY ARABIAN SHIPWRECKS AND OTHER SURPRISES

You will always be surprised at what lies behind the mist in the Konkan. Would you believe it has inspired cinema as we know it? The great Maratha Shivaji, while travelling through the coastal belt, got a taste of some rural yet sophisticated entertainment when he ran into the unclothed, unlettered Thakars, a forest-dwelling tribe. They narrated stories or *chitrakatha* on leaf scrolls painted with natural dyes. Craftsmen fashioned cutwork figures from animal hide while an ensemble of singers and musicians set a background score to the *jaiti* or shadow puppetry. Applying simple laws of light and physics, images projected on a screen by campfire were enlarged or reduced to create drama. The amazed crowds often believed that the shadows grew bigger because of


the blowing of the conch! Such unique storytelling was the purest form of entertainment long before the advent of moving talkies. We, on our part, were ready to be surprised by more than just the breathtaking beauty of the coast.

Ratnagiri is legendary for its Hapoos or Alphonso and we shamelessly headed for a homestay that promised unlimited mangoes for breakfast. A short 13 km drive from the town took us to Atithi Parinay at Kotawde where Medha Sahasrabuddhe greeted us cheerfully outside a beautiful laterite and stone house. Surrounded by the hills on three sides, the three-acre patch was located on the banks of the swirling Kusum river. Medha promised us a walk to the river and paddy fields beyond. "But all discoveries will have to wait," announced her mother Vasudha,

bringing out fresh banana leaves.

Though the Konkan coast is synonymous with its seafood and spicy Malvani fare, we were about to be introduced to the wonderful world of Chitpawan Brahmin cuisine. Out came hot *polis* (thin large *chappati* cooked with a little oil), *koshimbir* (dry uncooked vegetable *raita*), *aamti* (sweetish thin *daal*), *moramba* (mango preserve) and a cabbage-bean stir fry. "We have typical preparations. There's *kulith usal* (stir-fried horsegram), *bhopla bharit* (pumpkin mash), *padwal* (snake gourd), *sandhan* (jackfruit cake), *patodey* (rice cakes steamed in turmeric leaves), *chunda* (spicy mango preserve) and *gawasni chi poli* (rice flour *paratha*)," explained Vasudha aunty.

Over an extended lunch, we also learnt how the Sahasrabuddhes got their



At
home
by the
sea

unique family name. Originally called Ganpules, they were once employed as warriors and advisors of the Peshwas who gifted them a village. They came and settled in Kotawde but another family laid claim to the land. The Ganpules put forth a proposition that one representative from both sides would burrow in a hole; whoever could last longer would be the true owner. The wily Ganpules stocked up their hole with provisions, outlasted the opponent and got their land back. The Peshwas granted them the title 'sa-hastra-buddhi' or someone who had knowledge of both weapons and mind games.

After a quick tour of the property to see the tree house, a Swiss tent and the bamboo bridge over the river, we were off to Ganpatipule. Besides a touristy beach lined with hotels and eateries, the main attraction was Lord Ganesha's shore temple. The priest told us that once every year the surf comes up as if to touch the feet of the idol as a symbolic gesture. Legend has it that cows in a certain herd had stopped producing milk and would offer to be milked only at a particular spot on the reef, leading to the discovery of the self-manifest stone image. Devotees whispered their entreaties into the ears

of the large brass mouse outside the shrine while some circumambulated the hill over a paved path. After a quick peep at Pracheen Konkan, a showcase of the region's culture, we visited the birthplace of freedom fighter and statesman Bal Gangadhar Tilak at Ratnagiri. The humble two-storey house where he grew up is now a museum, displaying his personal belongings and achievements.

What we least expected was a palace in Ratnagiri for a Burmese king. After the British forces defeated and captured Thibaw, the erudite king of Burma (Myanmar) in 1885, they shipped

(Clockwise) The Atithi Parinay homestay, Chitpawan Brahmin cuisine, fresh catch from the sea and women working in the paddy fields





him first to Madras (Chennai) and then Ratnagiri to prevent a possible revolt back home. The rented bungalow where he was placed under house arrest was unfit for a king and the British permitted him to build a royal residence for himself. The king supervised the construction of Thibaw Palace every day till 1910 and both he and his wife breathed their last in the same building. Built out of laterite, mortar and Burmese teak, the majestic brick red palace on a grassy embankment has a small museum dedicated to the king.

Our royal obsession though was the Hapoos, the king of mangoes, and the trail led us to Devgad. There was something about the soil, air,

landscape or optimal proximity to the sea that made Devgad's mangoes unlike any other. The best mangoes came from a patch 20 km from the coast. Set amidst mango orchards and brick factories on the Devgad-Nipani Road (SH117), was Pitrukhaya homestay near Shirgaon. One of the earliest homestays developed by Culture Angan, the house came with a stunning terrace suite, paintings done by artists from Pinguli and bamboo furniture from Konkan Bamboo and Cane Development Centre (KONBAC) at Kudal. The warm couple Vaishali and Vijay Loke gave us an authentic taste of Malvani fare from *kolambi* (prawn) and *kalva* (clam) fry to Malvani mutton and *modka*, a small tasty fish found at the edge of the sea. The food was good and

in demand. The Lokes decided to open a small restaurant to cater to highway travellers. Named Pitrukhaya as a tribute to his father with whose blessings the house was made in 2000, it was Loke's mother Savitri Devi who caught our attention. We were amazed to learn that the quiet lady, who went about her daily chores and prayers with meticulous devotion, was 106 years old. "She even cuts vegetables and washes her clothes," chuckled Loke, ascribing it to her disciplined lifestyle, years of hard work and healthy diet.

A brief stop at the quiet Devgad Fort and we continued down the coast to Kunkeshwar. Situated on the very edge of the sea and lashed by

(Above) The Thibaw Palace built by the exiled Burmese king and (below) Ganpatipule beach



waves was a 400-year-old Shiva temple with a strange past. Caught in a storm, sailors of an Arabian vessel saw a light and promised to build a shrine to the region's chief deity if they survived. True to the promise, the Arabs constructed a temple out of laterite on the shore. Knowing that they would not be spared for this irreligious deed if they went back, they jumped from the temple and gave up their lives. Their *samadhi* can still be found here. The serene Mithbav Beach nearby had its share of unusual shrines like the Betaal Mandir dedicated to a wandering spirit that induced madness on any passersby at twilight. The cliff-top temple of Gajbadevi was dedicated to a goddess who appeared in a dream and instructed villagers to install her there for safe passage.

After much meandering, we finally came to Sawantwadi and found ourselves at Nandan Farms homestay, 2 km from town on Amboli Road. Tucked



Sawantwadi Palace

away in a 12-acre farm at the base of a small hillock, the ochre bungalow had a sloping tiled roof and earthy interiors. Cloaked in green, it was like being in an enchanted garden. Our friendly host Amruta Padgaonkar or Ammu, originally from Vengurla, was an expert in Malvani cuisine. We negotiated our way through a maze of *modaks*, endless *polis*, okra coconut fry, rice, *aanti* and *phanas* (jackfruit) fritters.

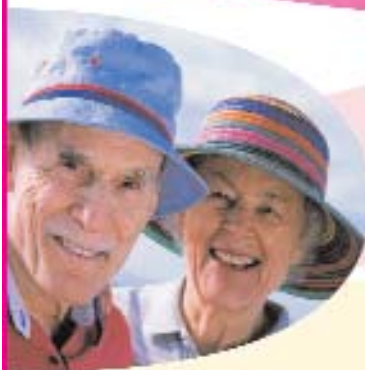
About 12 km from Sawantwadi on the road to Vengurla was Dwarka, an organic farmstay, that followed a

"plant to plate" philosophy. Dilip Aklekar showed us around his 15-acre farm with cashew, coconut, banana, pineapple and 230 Hapooos trees. "We grow our own fresh fruits, pulses and vegetables, have a vermi-compost plant, use bio gas for cooking, all the milk comes from our cows and we even practise *gomutra kheti* (using cow urine for agriculture)."

Orioles, hornbills and paradise flycatchers flitted about the trees as we too hopped from room to room, each done up in a different colour and style. The food was an amazing spread of *kombdi* (chicken) curry, deep-fried raw banana fritters, beetroot stir-fry, red gram curry and other delights. It was with great difficulty and the indolence of debauched nabobs (an Anglo-Indian term for an East India Company servant who became wealthy through corrupt trade and other practices) that we could move out of there. As if justifying the adage, "Only when the belly is full can

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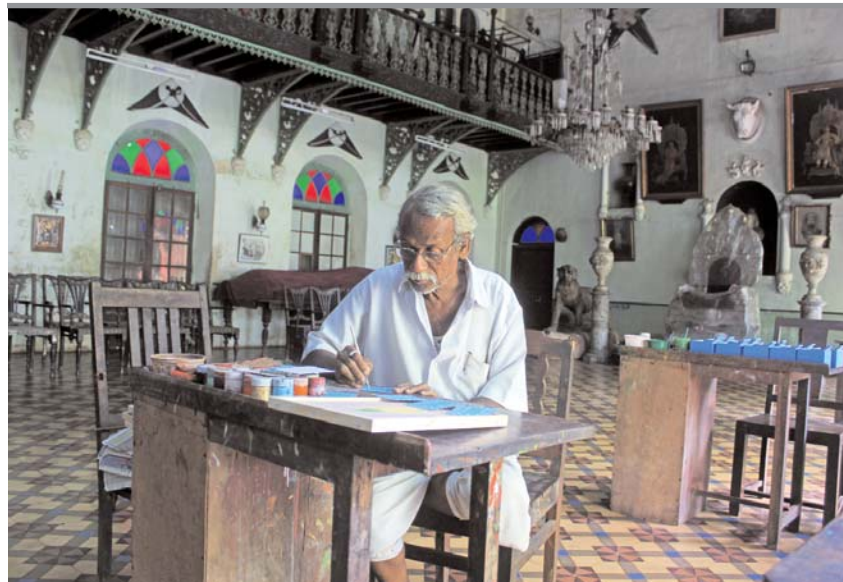
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(Clockwise) An artist at work, wooden dolls and Ganjifa cards

the arts prosper," we set off on a leisurely cultural tour of Sawantwadi.

Unlike us, the wisened hand that held the paintbrush was rock-steady as it hovered over an old, wooden table. It swept down to make a few deft swirls and strokes and a warrior's white horse reared out of the table. MV Kulkarni, the old artist, smiled at our awestruck expressions before he nonchalantly rubbed it off with a rag, saying, "Now I'll paint a figure." Again, we saw a masterpiece getting completed in under a minute. No pencil sketch, no reference image... just endless years spent painting Ganjifa cards had made artists like Kulkarni "imagine things right before the eyes."

We were now in the durbar hall of the 17th century Sawantwadi Palace.

Sunlight filtered in from a row of windows as we watched a clutch of artists engrossed in the detail of their design, struggling to keep an ancient tradition from vanishing into the mists of time. Each card is a complete hand-painted artwork. The group of *chitrakars* (artists) spend hours to produce diverse styles and decks. Their work was clearly demarcated. Some gave base colour to the cards, others worked on symbols, a few worked on the borders while the senior artists painted the intricate court cards of the suit.

Seated in the portico of her beautiful palace, Satwashiladevi, the queen, shared more about this unique art which was saw a revival under her royal patronage since 1972. "Ganjifa, possibly of Persian or Urdu

origin, means 'stacking'. It was probably the Mughal rulers who introduced these playing cards in India as early as 7th century. It became popular in other princely states like Bengal and Kashmir and gradually moved to Mysore and Odisha. The original Mughal Ganjifa or *Changa-kanchan* has 96 cards in the standard eight decks of 12 cards each based on the eight departments of the state — treasury, armoury, music and so on," she shared.

Soon, artists started adapting it for the masses with Hindus themes of mythology and astrology. The Dashavatara Ganjifa has the incarnations of Vishnu in 10 sets of 120 cards. Rashi Ganjifa, based on the zodiac, has 144 cards and the *navagraha*-based ones on planets have 108. The antique collections were made of cloth, ivory, leather and palmyra leaves and can be found in royal homes and museums.

In Chitare Ali, a rambling lane ascending from the picturesque Moti Talav, Prakash Balu Chitari intently slathered *kitta* (a paste of tamarind seeds, pebbles, powdered and dried jute pulp and sawdust) on a wooden mango with a palette knife. "We always

use *pangara* wood, it is porous and light. The paste fills the pores and acts as a base. After this dries, we apply paint using brushes made of animal hair (squirrel, goat or bear)," he said.

Chitari was one of the few surviving practitioners of the age-old tradition of handcrafted wooden lacquerware. From 36 families, it had whittled down to five. "It is time-consuming but lucrative. Brahmin families in Goa and Maharashtra buy entire sets of these toys as part of a bridal trousseau. So, besides domestic sales and exports, one wedding helps us earn up to ₹8,000" he said. His wife chuckled, "But we do all the hard work. My children and I cut leaves from recycled paper, paint them, fix the stalks and add the finishing touches."

Like a scaled-down version of Karnataka's toy town Channapatna, vibrant wooden handicrafts, artificial fruit bowls and strings, lacquered bangles and beads, corkwood flowers, spinning tops, puzzles, rattles and *paats* (wooden dais) were stacked for sale and a few shop-cum-factories lined the street. At



PD Kanekar's shop, we saw a live demo of the quirky toys — collapsible giraffes, kissing pigs, monkeys on wire, a brood of pecking hens, and so on. Besides the signature vegetables and fruits collections in all sizes and colours, we also found Mexican-style *ristras* (chillies, onions and garlic on strings) and local versions of the enigmatic Russian Matryoshka dolls.

Just a few kilometres away at the Thakar Adivasi Kala Kendra at Pinguli, Parashuram Vishram Gangawane's live demonstration of the *dona vadya* (vessel instrument) had us

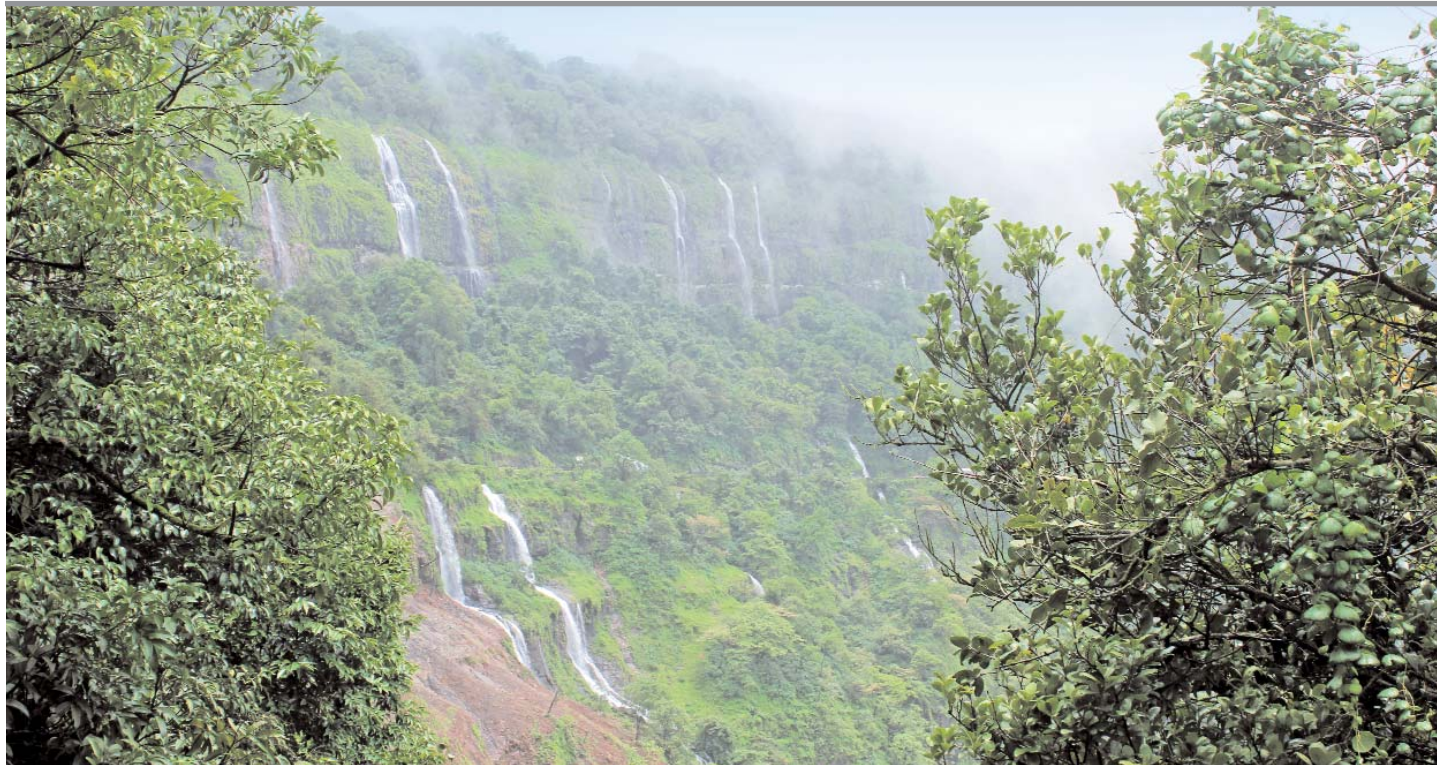
captivated. On a large upturned trough used to serve *kanji* (gruel), he scraped two ladles to produce a wailing tune and sang a haunting melody. "We are *paramparik kalakars* of the Thakar community, a forest-dwelling tribe who inhabited the *tekdis* of Sahyadri *paat* (hills of the Western Ghats). What you saw was one of our 11 *loka kalas* (folk arts), performed by our women during Ganesh Chaturthi as a symbolic gesture to rouse Lord Ganesha."

Shivaji gave the Thakars *raj-ashray* (royal asylum) and they received further patronage from Sawantwadi's rulers like Khem Sawant and Bapu Maharaj, who helped them develop their art and showcase it over nine days at the Kelbai temple in Kudal. With royal consent, they could take their *tambura* and *taal* to collect one *ser* of *dhaan* (kilo of rice) and alms from each house.

For nearly six months of the year, the Thakars travelled from village to village carrying their *jaiti* (box) of nearly 50 puppets. As soon as they placed their bundles down at the headman's house, word would spread about their arrival. They would perform the *chitrakatha* the same evening before

(Above) A local takes shelter from the rain and (below) the Amboli Ghat covered with mist





(Above) A view of the Amboli Ghat and (below) a Pinguli royal courtroom painting

moving to the next village in the morning. Not surprisingly, the kings of Sawantwadi often employed these nomadic artistes as spies and informants.

They were given imperial hand-made paper and commissioned to paint permanent artworks. "I have a priceless cache of nearly 500 old paintings that have managed to survive, along with hundreds of puppets that are not displayed," Parashuram said, gesturing at his makeshift museum, a renovated *gothan* (cowshed) cramped with artefacts.

"Where's the space here or the money to build a bigger complex? How much can I do alone, without any support? Of the 125 Thakar houses here, only one or two strive to keep this 500-year-old tradition alive. And what of *Pugdi geet*, *Tarva geet*, *Povada*, *Kal-sutri bavlya*, *Gondal*, *Poth raja...*" his voice quavered. "In Panglu Bael, a bedecked bullock accompanies a *dhholki* player, reminding all those who hear it of the departed souls. There's Pingli, where a man with a rattledrum leaves home at 3 am and returns at dawn, serving as a watchman and an alarm clock on the move."



With the odd shows and homestays like Nandan Farms and Dwarka Farmhouse as platforms, Pinguli's artists have found a tiny window to exhibit their talent. At the souvenir section, we browsed through stunning paintings on epic themes available for a song. An hour's show with eight people could be arranged for as little as ₹5,000 while traditional frescoes could be created for as little as ₹300-400 per sq ft. It was a far cry

from the old days when they were gifted as much grain as they could carry away without losing balance over 10 paces.

As we boarded the Konkan Kanya Express on our return train journey to Mumbai, it seemed nothing short of travesty that urban malls showcased a glut of mass-produced branded goods while rural artisans struggled to keep ancient traditions from vanishing into the mists of time.