

# Memory Stones of the Wadar Tribe in Maharashtra

Dr. Vikram Kulkarni

Department of Drawing and Painting  
S.N.D.T. Women's University, Pune, India

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**Abstract:** The Wadar is a wandering tribe of labourers who have migrated from Andhra Pradesh to Maharashtra. Memory stones probably crafted by the Wadar themselves have been discovered at some places like Ahmednagar and Sholapur. These stone slabs have carvings of the *Devarshiof* of the family. In some places the stones have carvings of couples. These memory stones are placed along with shrines. The present research paper attempts to trace the origin of these memory stones. The conclusion has been supplemented with a discussion of the design and the features of these Memory stones. Some of the stones contain blurred writing as well. An analysis of the iconography has been made on the basis of the death ritual among the Wadars as also the worship of the forefathers on the day of Dussehra. The memory stones and the practice of worship bring to light the overlapping of the matriarchal and patriarchal system in the Wadar culture.

**Keywords:** Memory Stones, Potraj, Wadar, Wadar form of worship

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## 1. Introduction

The Wadar can be described as the most hardworking community from among the various wandering tribes of Maharashtra. Search of work makes the Wadars wander from place to place. They carry with them donkeys, sheep, goats, hens, dogs as per their financial capacity. The places of road construction, dams or lakes are invariably lined by the hutments of the Wadars. Although a wandering tribe, they seem to be settling down in clusters of huts (Mande: 1983: 159). Their settlements can be located on the borders of the old outskirts of every city. The Wadars seem to have settled in Maharashtra during the last 8 to 9 decades.

As mentioned in the study of Ramnath Chavan and Ramchandra Nalawde the Wadars of Maharashtra prominently belong to three sub-castes viz. the Dagdi Wadars, Gadi Wadars or the Mati Wadars. The writings of Laxman Mane and R.E. Enthoven make reference to the Bhoj Wadars. The Dagdi Wadars seem to be considered the most superior among all the sub-castes. They traditionally work in stone quarries. Apart from stone construction they also make tools such as *Pata-Vaevanta* and flour milling stones. They are gifted with an immaculate knowledge of stones. 'Kalla' in Kannada implies a stone and hence they are also called Kalla Wadars. Jati Wadars, Girani Wadars, Phatare Wadars, Pathrut Wadar setc are yet some other names by which they are recognised. This community indulges in all the tasks related to construction and seems to have been classified into sub-castes on the basis of their tasks. The Gadi Wadars are also known as Bhandi Wadars or Bandi Wadars while Mannu Wadars, Matti Wadars and Dukkar Wadars are other nomenclatures for Mati Wadars. (Enthoven 1920: Vol-3, 138 – 149).

## 2. Research Methodology

The survey for the present research located memorial stones of the Wadar families at Ahmednagar and Sholapur. The chronology of the memorial stones could be established by the costumes of the images on the stones. These images have been interpreted on the basis of the customs, festivals, celebrations and worship of this community. The present research paper employs the method of conclusion through a complementary study of sociology and the traditions of painting and sculpture.

## 3. The Wadar form of worship

The Wadars worship various kinds of deities. Their mythological deities include Rama, Seeta, Hanumana and Balaji and they are worshipped with offerings of fruits and flowers. The other types of deities are folk deities for whom hens or goats are sacrificed (Rao 1990:260). These deities include the female deities of the Dravidians. These basically are the village deities. The Wadars in course of time probably incorporated the local deities in Maharashtra. Some of the Wadars also worship the *Peers*. The shrines of the Wadars also contain the *taaks* offered to the forefathers.

Every clan performs social, protective, disciplinary, economic and religious duties. The worship of the deities, festivals, celebrations, family rituals, religious traditions etc. are performed devoutly by all the members of the family. It is the responsibility of every member of every clan to acquire the related knowledge. (Gundi 1987: Vol-2, 307 – 308). A family of Wadars is called a 'Kullum'. The family traditions and religious customs serve the purpose of binding together this nomadic

tribe which otherwise does not settle in any one single place. The worship of the forefathers also proves a significant ritual from that point of view.

#### 4. The Worship of the Forefathers

The Wadars remember their forefathers in the light of their divine qualities. In every generation of every family one person gets possessed by the family deity. This virtue is transmitted invariably into the next generation either through the son or the nephew. Such a person is known as *Devarshi*. The *Devarshi* follows a very rigorous daily routine. He does not eat or drink at others' hands and worships all the deities regularly. This rigorous routine is mandatory in order to maintain the sanctity of the deities. He maintains the shrine of the family. Images of gods and goddesses, idols, holy pitchers, the anklets of goddesses, the images of forefathers and pictures of the deceased are kept in the shrine.

As such the *Devarshi* is held in high respect in the clan. The *Devarshi* performs the duty of the worship of the family deity. He is also known as *Potraj*. The *Potraj* earlier sported long hair though this practice seems to have been discontinued of late. Though the Wadars follow the patriarchal system today, once upon a time it was the matriarchal system that prevailed with them. This form of worship seems to overlap with many others as is evident through their rituals. The matriarchal system focuses on the worship of the female goddesses. The woman from the family gets possessed by the family deity and this woman is awarded the same status as the *devarshi*.

As a wandering tribe the Wadars live on the outskirts of the mainstream society and follow unique rituals. Almost all wandering tribes perform burial instead of cremation for their dead. The Wadars do not observe *shraddhanor* do they follow the *pitrupaksha*. The forefathers are however worshipped on the day of Dussehra (Pawar 2010:34). The Wadars originally were residents of South India. In course of time they were forced to lead a wandering life as the outcasts of the mainstream society. Hence they incorporated the customs of the mainstream society and fused them with their original traditions as seen in their worship of forefathers. The worship of forefathers as performed on the Dussehra and GudiPadwa comprises of offering food and clothes to the forefathers. The deceased are offered a *naivedya* of mutton.

#### 5. The Memory Stones of Forefathers

The practice of erecting memory stones of forefathers seems to be present in various clans, tribes and regions. The brave heroes who lose their life in a war or in an adventurous feat are referred to as *veers*. They are worshipped as a mark of respect or as a preventive measure against falling out of their favour. Vertical stone slabs, wooden blocks, uncut stones or carved images are installed in their honour. Such memorials of the brave are found abundantly in many villages. In course of time the heroes get raised to the status of the village deity. In Karnataka the memorial stones are known as *Kalla* while in Maharashtra they are known as *Veergal* (Joshi 2000: Vol-9, 19). In the tribal community of Madhya Pradesh such stones are known as *gata* or *gatla*. These however are constructed in the event of an untimely death (Khan 1996:24 – 35). Large *Veergals* are found in the Ghagbari town on the Nasik Saputara road. These are known as *Chira*. These stones carry images of all the members of the family. Some stones carry images of multiple couples. The images of the dead are smeared with *shendur* while the images of those alive are not. These stones present a kind of family tree. Similarly, at very many places all over India the memory slabs seem to have been erected in honour of *sati*. Very often on these stone slabs carry the images of the sun and the moon. The upper top of the slab is semicircular in shape. The practice of erecting memorial stones was probably started to perpetuate the bravery of the forefathers.

Memory stones of forefathers have been found at some settlements of the Wadar community. It can be deduced that the Wadars started installing uncut slabs at the place where the *devarshi* of their family was buried after death. In their nomadic life the Wadars preserved the memory of their forefathers by placing the *taaks* in the shrine. Very often, it was perpetuated by naming the grandchildren after them. As the Wadars began to settle down in a place they carved the images of forefathers in stones and constructed temples for them. These are known as *Gudi*. The Wadars are gifted with the skill of stone carving, though gross. This is probably how the Wadars have come up with such memory stones for their forefathers.

#### 6. The Antiquity of the Memory Stones of the Wadars

During the survey of the present research paper, memory stones were found in the districts of Ahmednagar and Sholapur. These slabs can be dated on the basis of the costumes depicted on the images. 'The Castes and Tribes of Southern India' (Vol-5) by Thurston Edgar (1909) carries pictures of Wadars. Similarly, 'The Tribes and Castes of Bombay' (Vol-3) by Enthoven (1920) also carries pictures of people with similar costumes. The costume comprises of a particular style of the turban, *dhoti* and a tunic (F – 2). Similar costume is also found in the picture on the wall of the Wadar temple at Bhingar (F – 3). It can be deduced that the memorial stone in F-1 belongs to 1920 or an earlier date. The Wadars today don't seem to wear this kind of costume. The

various surveys carried out by British officers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century carry descriptions of the costumes of the workers which match with the images on the memorial stones.



Figure 1: Memory Stones  
(Bhingar- Wadarwadi,  
Ahmednagar)



Figure 2:  
The Tribes and Castes  
of Bombay (1920.)

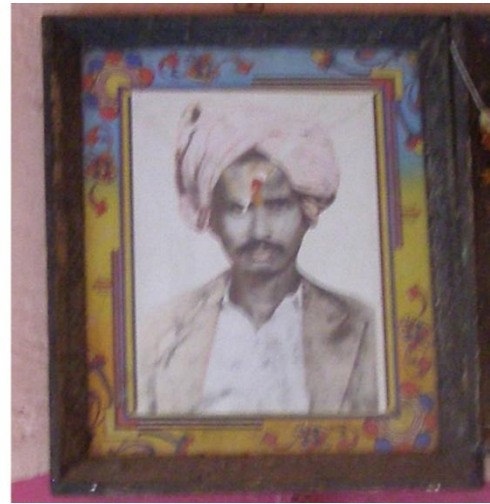


Figure 3: Photo in Wadar Shrine  
(Bhingar-Wadarwadi,  
Ahmednagar)

Some of the memorial stones of later times however display a different style of costumes. The Wadars seem to wear a Gandhi cap on the head [F – 4]. The common people had joined the Indian independence movement during the Gandhi era as per their capacity. The commoners had accepted *khadi* and the Gandhi cap as the standard costume. This practice was probably started in 1920. This shift in the costume is visible in the memory stones of the Wadars and hence it can be maintained that the memorial stones with these costumes belong to the period after 1920.



Figure 4: Memory Stones (Majarewadi, Solapur)

### 7. The memory stones of Wadars and Devarshis

The *Veergals* of the brave warriors depict the war scene while some of the memorial stones of the Wadars show a whip in the hand of the forefathers. This indicates that the image is that of the family *devarshior* the *potraj*.

The word '*potraj*' is a corrupt Marathi form of the word '*potturaj*' from the Dravidian language. *Pettuor pottu* implies a bull. The worship of the village deity in the South comprised mainly of sacrificing a bull and the person executing this sacrifice ritual naturally came to be known as *potturaj* or *potraj*. In the South, the group of the village deities known as Seven Sisters includes and *potraj* is known as their brother (Dhere 1964:97). One the rituals of the Wadars comprises of whacking oneself with a whip. Hence the whip occupies an important position in the shrine of the Wadars. Some of the Wadars install a decorative wooden shrine and its

front is decorated with a picture of the potraj carrying a whip in the hand (F – 6). The Wadar memorial stones also carry such images of forefathers carrying a whip (F – 5).



Figure 5: Wadar Memory Stones (Bhingar-Wadarwadi, Ahmednagar) (Pune)



Figure 6: Potraj on Painted wooden Shrine of Wadar

### 8. The Design and Features of the Memory Stones of the Wadars

The memory stones have been most likely crafted by the Wadars themselves since the carving is rather unrefined. As skilled stone-cutters it seems logical that the Wadars crafted the memory stones. A memory stone at Bajartala near Shrirampur carries the letters ‘Ramalu’ engraved on it. It also carries the image of the moon. The image of the sun however, seems to be missing. It can be deduced that the person who crafted this stone was ignorant of the iconography (F-8).



Figure 7: Wadar Memory Stones lettering (Bajartala-Shrirampur, Ahmednagar)



Figure 8: Wadar Memory Stones lettering (Bajartala-Shrirampur, Ahmednagar)

The style of the text is indicative that an illiterate Wadar copied the lettering written out by someone else (F-7, 8).

There is an attempt to make the characters as real as possible. The face and the moustache are an attempt at bringing out the personality. The physique seems to have been brought out quite well. The crafting of the stone as seen in the accompanying figures bears evidence (F-9).



Figure 9: Wadar Memory Stones- Various Characters

When the women of the Wadar family get possessed by deities they appear like living goddesses. This form of worship belongs to the ancient matriarchal system. In course of time however the patriarchal system took over and the men gained dominance in the various rituals. Researchers like D.D. Kosambi, MangalaSamant etc. claim that many primitive clans and tribes have retained the original matriarchal form of worship even today. Some of the stones therefore carry images of both the male and the female (F – 10, 11). These images are those of *Devarshis* and the living goddess. They are an evidence of the fusion of the matriarchal and patriarchal cultures.



Figure 10: Wadar Memory Stones- Couple Figures (Bajartala-Shrirampur, Ahmednagar)



Figure 11: Wadar Memory Stones- Couple Figures (Bajartala-Shrirampur, Ahmednagar)

## 9. Conclusion

The memory stones among the Wadars are predominantly those of the *Devarshis* of the family. Some of the stones also have carvings of women. The women who get possessed by the deities are awarded a venerated status in the family. Such memory stones came to be erected when this wandering tribe began to settle at various places. The Wadars seem to have settled in Maharashtra at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a strong likelihood that these memory stones were carved by the Wadars themselves. They seem to have succeeded in creating resemblance to the original human figures. There is an attempt at reproducing the personality of the forefathers through the physique, facial features, moustache, costumes etc. The costumes are valid indicators of the construction of these memorial stones. The images with turbans were probably made

before 1920 while those with a Gandhi cap belong to the period after 1920. Many of the memory stones have a semicircular upper top resembling a *veergal*. The possibility that the Wadars took inspiration for these memory stones from the *veergal* cannot be ruled out.

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### About the Author:



**Dr. Vikram Kulkarni** Assistant Professor at Postgraduate Department of Drawing and Painting, Pune, since 2004. He studied painting [G.D. Art (Applied), G.D.Art (Fine Art), A.T.D., Dp.A.Ed.]. He completed Masters and Ph.D. from Tilak Maharashtra University. His expertise in different aspects helps him in his teaching assignments. He has been awarded various awards for his paintings which includes Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture. So far in 7 single 9 duet shows and more than 60 group shows he has exhibited. He published 10 research papers in international journals and presented papers in 8 seminars. He completed research project of SUUTI and he recently awarded junior fellowship form Asiatic Society, Mumbai.