

History of Koli Samaj

About the Article

A time comes when each one of us asks, 'Who am I? Who were my forefathers? Where did they come from? How did they live? What were their triumphs and tribulations?' These and a number of others are some of the fundamental questions that we must find answers to, to get to learn about our roots.

This article is an attempt to help remind us of the stories we have heard and to go over some of the details that our scholars have gleaned from their studies to explore our roots.

Let us go back and dig deeper into our background.

In studying the aboriginal tribes of India, scholars have consulted our most ancient records and documents - the Vedas, the Puranas, the epics in different languages, many archaeological records and notes, and various other publications.

Students of history and anthropology have found numerous instances recorded in all prehistoric and established history of India, of a glowing past of this ancient tribe of India and more is being uncovered as research continues.

Over the centuries, various scholars have written about their findings on this subject and various treatises in a number of Indian languages by different scholars are in circulation.

The Koli tribe, which in its various subgroups forms about 20% of the population of present India is mentioned continuously through the centuries - way back to Mohanjo Daro and beyond. Historians and scholars find that Koli tribe, a ruling Kshtria Caste, was spread far and wide all over India. Their heroic exploits and learned reputation and relationships with the most powerful of those times regarded them with awe and respect.

This article is based mainly on three publications written in Gujarati. 'An ancient Tribe of Bharat - The History of Koli Tribe' a book edited by Shree Bachoobhai Pitamber Kambad and published by Shree Talpada Koli Community of Bhavnagar (First Edition 1961 and Second Edition 1981), an article by Shree Ramjibhai Santola published in Bombay Samachar in 1979 and a lengthy paper prepared by Dr. Arjun Patel in 1989 for presentation at the International Koli Samaj Conference in 1989

The Historic Heroes of Our Tribe Historical findings suggest that our ancestry has left behind an illustrious record of their achievements that we can be proud of.

The most ancient King Mandhata, a supreme and universal ruler whose reputation spread far and wide throughout India and whose stories of valour and yajna were described in the stone carvings of Mohanjo Daro, belonged to this tribe.

The most ancient and revered sage Valmiki, the author of Ramayana belonged to this tribe. Even today Ramayana is referred to as Koli Valmiki Ramayan in Maharashtra State. Teachings from Ramayan form the basis of Indian culture.

The great king Chandra Gupta Mourya, and his line of descendent kings belonged to the Koli tribe. Lord Budhha's mother and his wife belonged to the Koli tribe.

Sant Kabir, a weaver by trade, ended several of his 'bhajans' as 'kahet kabir kori' was a self-confessed Koli. Bhaktaraj Bhadurdas and Bhaktaraj Valram from Saurashtra, Girnari Sant Velnathji from Junagadh, Bhaktaraj Jobanpagi, Sant Sri Koya Bhagat, Sant Dhudhalinath, Madan Bhagat, Sany Kanji Swami of 17th and 18th Century all belonged to the Koli tribe. Their life and reputation were described in books of their life and in articles published in Mumbai Samachar, Nutan Gujarat, Parmarth etc.

In the State of Maharashtra, Sivaji's Commander-in-Chief and several of his Generals belonged to this tribe. 'A History of the Marathas' note with pride the bravery of Sivaji's army consisting mainly of Mavalis and Kolis. His General, Tanaji Rao Malusare, who was always referred to by Sivaji as 'My Lion' was a Koli. When Tanaji fell fighting for and winning the 'Kodana Fort', Sivaji renamed the fort as 'Sinhghadhh' in his memory.

In the 1857 uprising a number of Koli women fighters played an important role in trying to save the life of the 'Rani of Jhansi'. Among them was a very close colleague of the queen named Zalkari. The Koli Samaj, thus, has given India and the world, great sons and daughters whose teachings are of universal import and of relevance to modern day living.

Legend of our Ancient King Mandhata Archaeological findings of Mohenjo Daro are estimated to date back to 5000-3000 B.C. The stone inscriptions there describe the great Koli Kings and their Pyanchayet method of administration in their kingdoms. References to the Great King Mandhata are found many times and the various aspects of his life, deeds of valour, and yajna are described in a number of publications.

These details described here are a condensed version of an extended article written in Gujarati by Shree Raghunath Brahambhatt and published in 'Akhand Anand' in June 1964.

'King Mandhata is estimated to have lived some ten thousand years ago. Long after him were born such great souls as Shree Ram, Shree Krishna and Lord Buddha. Yet the greatness of King Mandhata's achievements were such that a household phrase came into universal use to this day when comparing others to ask – 'Was he as great as Mandhata?' Mandhata has been compared as the brightest star in the Sun Dynasty and was born in the 15th generation of Brahma. The great Manu was of the 5th generation and 10th generation after Manu was Mandhata. Shree Ram is said to be born as 25th generation after Mandhata. Ishvaku was another great King of the 'Sun Dynasty Koli Kings' and so Mandhata and Shree Ram were said to be of Ishvaku Sun Dynasty. This Dynasty later got divided into

nine major sub groups, all claiming their roots to the Kshtria Caste. They are: Malla, Janak, Videhi, Koliye, Morya, Lichchhvi, Janatri, Vajji, and Shakya.'

There is a strange story of the birth of Mandhata.

King Yuvenashawer, Mandhata's father had hundred wives but no male child was born to them. He consulted many Rishis and finally came to Bhargav Rishi who agreed to perform a yajna to beget a son for him. At the end of the yajna, a pot of mantra-charged-water was put aside for the king to be taken to his queen the next morning. During the night, the king became thirsty and went looking for water in the Ashram. He saw the pot and quenched his thirst with this potent water. In due course, a son was delivered by cutting open the King's abdomen. God Indra heard of this unique incident and came to see the infant. To the question who will feed and protect the child God Indra put his thumb in the child's mouth and said 'Ma thasyati'. Thus the child was named 'Mandhata' and later learned the art of warfare from God Indra and acquired his unconquerable Bow.

King Mandhata with his superior strength, knowledge and well-equipped army conquered vast areas and many surrounding kingdoms. He would reinstate the defeated kings. Such a king would be made to agree to the payment of an annual tax. An ambassador would be posted in each such kingdom to ensure compliance and good governance. Such a king would also enjoy the protection of Mandhata. To fulfil this promise he once had to fight his own Godfather Indra, who when defeated, challenged Mandhata to fight Lavnasur, a demon king. Soon an opportunity for a battle with this demon king arose. For an ever-victorious King Mandhata, this encounter proved to be an anticlimax end to his life. The King and his army marched right into Lavnasur's kingdom but no resistance was forthcoming. Evening was approaching. King Mandhata decided to camp for the night, confident of capturing Lavnasur the next day. Lavnasur's agents however infiltrated the camp in the night and killed the sleeping king.

Archaeological findings, when pieced together, show Mandhata as belonging to Ishvaku – Sun Dynasty and his descendents were known as 'Sun Dynasty Koli Kings'. They were known to be brave, illustrious and just rulers. Buddhist texts have numerous references proving this beyond doubt. The descendants of Mandhata played a vital role and our ancient Vedas, epics and other relics mention their important contributions in the art of war and state administration. They are referred to in our ancient Sanskrit books as Kulya, Kuliye, Koli Serp, Kolik, Kaul etc.

Early history – After Buddha

It was during the year 566 BC, when the Hindu religion became cruel and thoroughly degraded that Prince Gautam, later known to the world as Buddha (the enlightened one) was born in a little Kingdom by the river Rohini in a Himalayan valley in northwest India. Lord Buddha's mother, Maha Maya was a Koli princess.

When Gautam, the prince, who was later to become Lord Buddha, described the qualities of a princess he would be prepared to marry, his parents decided that such a princess could only be found in a Koli

kingdom. Gautam went on to marry Yashodara, one his cousins. A son called Rahul was born to them. Soon after that at age 29, Gautam left home to find an answer to the ills of the world.

After years of severe penance, study and meditation he became the enlightened one - Buddha.

The teachings of Lord Buddha were seen as a threat to vested interests of the upper-caste Hindus. Soon, the teachings of Buddha was completely banished from India.

It appears that Koli Kingdoms with their relationship and affinity to Buddha suffered most from this persecution. Although the vast majority never embraced Buddhist teachings, they been cold shouldered by others and suffered neglect from the rulers.

2000 Years After Lord Buddha The upheaval must have proved too much for the Koli kingdoms. It appears that because of prolonged deprivations in the highly complex Hindu society, a once powerful tribe, hardworking, skilled, loyal, self-sufficient but easily provoked into war, lost its central position. A tribe that founded and built Bombay - named after the name of their Goddess, Mumba Devi, finds it hard even to this day to get into positions of political or academic influence. For centuries now, other tribes have looked down upon them and the resulting psychological effects were devastating for this entire community of Kshtrias.

On the whole, conditions of Kolis were humiliating and little better than being on the bottom rung, even as late as the late 18th century. Majority of the people being powerless and property less, were constantly in search of labour and almost always in debt. Having fallen into this cycle of poverty, they were fully taken advantage of by the upper castes. Generations were tied to bonded labour and treated just as bad. For a once proud people, their reaction was uncompromising. Frequently they engaged in gang robberies, plundering and looting. They got involved in piracy on high seas. The British, who faced these forays a long time, eventually subdued them. They much appreciated these 'misguided' but secretive, loyal and trustworthy band and lavished praise on them saying, 'In these plundering parties they often display a very desperate courage; and it is to their honour that, rude and lawless as they are, they do not apparently delight in blood for its own sake, and neither mutilate, torture, nor burn the subjects of their cupidity or revenge like the far worse 'dacoits' of Bengal or Ireland.' Records suggest that the years between 15th to 18th centuries were the most deprived and degraded years for Koli.

The Present In present day India, Kolis are found from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari and are known by slightly different names according to the languages of the regions. The following are some of the major groups: Koli Kshtria, Koli Raja, Koli Rajput, Koli Suryavanshi, Nagarkoli, Gondakoli, Koli Mahadev, Koli Patel, Koli Thakor, Bavraya, Tharkarda, Pathanvadia, Mein Koli, Koyeri, Mandhata Patel etc.

As an original tribe of India preferring to live in open agricultural landscape and coastal regions as clansman, the present day Kolis are a product of much intermarriage. It has been estimated that there are over 1040 subgroups all lumped together as Koli in the population census. Vast majority have very little in common except that they are Hindus, that the upper class Hindus have always accepted that a

Koli's touch does not defile and Koli chiefs of pure blood are difficult to distinguished from the Kshtria Rajputs among whom there are regular intermarriage.

Kolis of Gujarat Writers Anthovan and Dr. Wilson believe that the original settlers in Gujarat were Kolis and Adivasi Bhils. Ravbahadur Hathibhai Desai confirms this to be so at the time of ruler Vanraj some 600 years ago. The very diverse ethnic groups represented now in the Gujarati population is said to be Vedic or Dravidian. These include the Nagar Brahman, Bhatia, Bhadela, Koli, Rabari, Mina, Bhangi, Dubla, Naikda, and Macchi-Kharwa tribes. Parsis, originally from Persia, represent a much later influx. The rest of the population is the adivasi Bhil tribe. It must be accepted that centuries of intermixing in all the peoples of the world in addition to natural, environmental and historical upheavals have left not a single race of the people intact and of pure blood. Untold number of civil wars and even world wars have been fought by misguided people to prove themselves a super race and practice ethnic cleansing on a large scale. In Northern Gujarat competent observers have noted that the Kanbi and Patidars castes have married into Koli caste for generations. And in 1918-19 it was a Patidar who introduced an Intercaste Marriage Bill to regularise the practice. The social hypocrisy of asserting the vanity of being of upper class among all Indian groups appears to be for no reason other than self and group vain glory.

While Kolis and Bhils may have been the original inhabitants of Gujarat they lost ground to the later arrivals and most likely settled near the coast and hills. Kolis in particular with their affinity to Buddha suffered severe discrimination in earning a living. As an original Kshtritya fighting caste, their one characteristic of being easily provoked to fight did not help. They may also be described as ruggedly individualistic more so at that time then now. For majority of them life even two hundred years ago was one of severe hardship, bonded labour and indignity. That was the price they paid to submission.

The census of 1931 put the Koli population of Gujarat and Kathiavad to 24% of the total. This large proportion is said to be because all people settled in the plains and the coastal areas were treated as Kolis. They represented the five distinct groups who by now had developed separately and had lost contact with one another but put together as Talpadas.

Kolis of Navsari, Surat and Surrounding Areas

Let us glance at that part of the Koli tribe known as 'Koli Patel' and 'Koli Mandhata Patel' of Surat and Navsari Districts of Southern Gujarat.

The census of 1931 for Surat District put the Koli population as numbering 106,321. This was one sixth of the total. They were mostly residing in eight talukas of Surat and six of Navsari. Kolis also formed a good part of the adjacent Indian Kingdoms, particularly Gaekwad, etc spreading to Baroda and the Sachin State, in a total of about 600-700 villages. This cluster is formed within some 21 districts of Southern Gujarat and is estimated to have 900,000 Kolis. Among themselves this cluster maintains close social contacts with peoples of nearby districts and villages.

Among the higher caste in Gujarat the southern Gujarat Kolis enjoyed both a highly positive and the generations old negative reputations. Among the positive side, and this is perhaps within the last 200 years, they were described as brave and courageous, conscious and hard-working, nationalistic and independent in spirit, reliable and said to be remarkably faithful when trusted. On the other hand the old picture of a thief, robbers, pirates and plunderers of the high seas. For this reason Kolis everywhere were looked down upon by the higher castes.

A serious scholar of the peoples of Gujarat, Alice Clarke, believes that it was easy and rather opportunist to blame the Kolis for criminal activities. Kolis were too simple and were really the victims of the then prevailing social circumstances. Historian David Hardiman too held the same opinion. Whatever the truth, the negative reputation stayed with them for a very long time. The literature of the day described the villain characters in their stories as Kolis, thus scandalising the whole tribe. Even today the stigma has not fully worn off.

In Bharuch and Surat District Talabdas form the main group. In the south the highest Kolis are called Mandhata Sororaria or Mansororaria and Koli Patel or Mandhata Koli Patel. Exactly where they came from to live in the plains and near the coast around Surat and Navsari is not known. It is possible that they are the decedents of the Thakurs of Gujarat who fled to the hills in the time of Mahmud Begada's persecutions and later returned and settled as farmers. They are certainly said to be distinct from the Kolis of the Deccan Plains.

Right until the beginning of 20th Century their chief occupation was agriculture, and farm labour. In this employment they were regarded as excellent cultivators and labourers. Most families had some land, which by this time had been handed down from father to son and as the supply of agricultural land in the area was limited the farms divided into smaller and smaller size. People living the coast developed fishing.

Their beliefs as far as is known were built on the stories of Ramayan and Mahabharat and Puranas enacted by visiting troupes. They worshipped Siva, Ram and Krishna and were prone to the prevailing superstitions. Yet the simple understanding of their Sanatan Hindu Dharma kept them God fearing and on the straight path.

As a whole the financial position of this group of people spread over some fifty villages was poor. They were mostly uneducated and majority of them led a simple life and were often in debt. For the vast majority of them job opportunity were confined to working on their own farm or farm labour. The nearest town was Navsari and this was on average 10 miles away. Surat was the main city some thirty miles away. Transportation was by bullock cart. So within the limits of finance and geography, life for majority of the population was confined within the limits of their and a few surrounding villages. A century ago social contacts among people living ten or twenty miles away was extremely limited. Any parent deciding to give their daughter in marriage to a far away village may not see the daughter again for years on end. For a family, marriage, birth of a child and death of a near relation were the main events in life. These were also a time of stress as such events plunged the families into debt and worry.

Simple religious festivals must have been a relief. At the turn of the century a slow but sure change was taking place for these people. All of a sudden it seems a giant has awoken. Slowly at first but picking up speed over the years men and women found hidden talent and strength. In the thirties and forties men confidently ventured out not just to the nearby cities but to the far corners of India and particularly overseas to New Zealand, South and East Africa.

The period between 1910 and 1920s was a period of great awareness for our people. While the problem of poverty was of personal importance to all our families this was delicately balanced with the need to make a full contribution in the Independence Struggle. In this respect the idealism of our youths was unstoppable. Clandestine groups were operating in all our villages. Network of news and information lines kept people aware of latest developments and movements of our leaders and their thoughts. Letters and visits from relations in South Africa kept people informed of developments there.

When on 9th January 1920, Bapu returned to India from South Africa a number of people who were with him there returned also. Bapu had personal knowledge of the character of our people. So when the time came to decide the destination of the 1930 Salt March it was no accident that he chose Dandi, from among a number of choices and pressures from other interested parties. He was convinced of the courage and the depth of understanding of our people in completing a project successfully. And so it proved.

During the 1930 Salt March and thereafter till Independence and particularly in 1942 when the British police opened fire on the peaceful demonstration wave after wave of our people filled the jails and in 1942 three of our young men gave their lives. A memorial in Matvad constantly reminds us of their sacrifice. Stories of great sacrifices made by Indians at all levels abound in every community.

Kolis Abroad The story of Koli Patel and Mandhata Koli Patel over the last fifty years is a story of only partial success. Thousands of young men from our villages had migrated to South Africa and East Africa and New Zealand and later to Canada and the USA. 1950s saw the wives and children of these men join them in those countries. In all these three countries they were left to live their typical Indian way of life. Each Indian group lived their own enclosed life surrounded by their Gods and ceremonies. Each group found the caste division and the associated status preceded them in these countries also.

Each lower group found some way of hiding their identity and raising their status in the eyes of other Indians. Some gave themselves fancy names, mixed with other groups, changed their diets and pretended to be of a higher caste. Africa In East Africa the Koli Patels adopted 'Mandhata' as the name of our community. We identified ourselves as belonging to the Mandhata Community and its related Association. Few however attempted to hide their Koliness or change their diet to pass as holier than thou.

But the 'Mandhata' name struck.

Our people who had settled in South Africa were the first to take an enlightened view of the Community as a whole and took constructive steps to attempt to uplift our people at home. They set up Transvaal Koli Hitwardhak Mandal, collected donations from our people there, invested this in a property in Navsari, and set up a Trust to give scholarships to encourage higher studies. They also funded the printing of a monthly magazine, 'NavPragati'. This was indeed an act of far reaching vision. This philanthropic work continues today.

From East Africa no single all embracing venture materialised. What help was given was organised ad hoc by Gam Mandals for the benefit of their Gam. In the main the financial assistance sent was sent for the upkeep of the family members in the Gam.

Here it may be worth pointing out that the first generation of our people in East Africa were almost all labourers or semi-skilled workers. Life there was lived almost exactly as in the Indian villages. One member of the family going out to work and the family depended on one wage. After the wives and children arrived, the children studied to perhaps matriculation level and entered the job market mostly as clerks. Few of our people there had the resources or the knowledge to start a business. In financial terms the most that can be said is that the majority of the families lived a frugal, mostly debt free but poor life. Very few had a business and fewer still own a house. Most of these families had been settled in East Africa for over thirty years and held British passports.

The period between 1965/70 brought in a sea change. One by one the East African countries became independent. The eventual aim of these countries was the Africanisation of the jobs starting with the lower and middle levels. Apart from the businessmen and professionals the vast majority of the Asians were in the middle level and they were already under pressure. British Government fearing a big influx of immigrants quickly passed legislation to limit entry to Britain by a quota allocation. In 1969 the weeks before the quota system was to be implemented in Kenya there were almost panic conditions to rush to Britain to avoid being caught up in the numbers game. Thousands just fled leaving everything except perhaps their prize possessions. Those left behind were struck for over a year in Kenya without jobs or any official help.

And those who were already here were left to their own devices to settle the best they can. It was to the credit of the genius of the ordinary Indian character that in spite of all the odds of unfamiliar weather, new conditions and systems, job and home difficulty the Indians managed to settle in very quickly.

In Uganda there was no immediate pressure under President Obote. He was however ousted by General Amin. Amin ordered all Asians to leave the country and gave them just two days to do so. In spite of a very large number of East African Asians having come to Britain in the last few years British leadership behaved in a very statesman like manner and welcomed the Uganda Asian and helped them settle. This was indeed a politically very difficult time as various other leaders like Enoch Powell who were making inflammatory speeches of 'rivers of blood' times to come, etc.

Unlike the first generation of Indians who came to East Africa were mainly labourers, the first generation of Indians who came to the United Kingdom were educated, well versed in English, skilled and experienced and many had run thriving businesses. Yet we had to prove ourselves the hard way in the job market. A lot of the well educated had to take up factory floor jobs to make ends meet. It was not long however that the employers realised our abilities. One by one we moved into positions of responsibilities. Our women took up jobs in local shops and factories and our children settled down to studies and proving themselves par excellent. Within two to three years of arriving in Britain most of our families, with the help of a mortgage bought their own homes. United Kingdom In a short span of time Britain had a large Indian population in most cities. It was as though East Africa was planted in Britain. The community Associations that functioned in East Africa started emerging here too. Soon each community was hundreds strong and boldly asserted their identity. We started celebrating our religious festivals and organised other cultural programmes.

Today, fifty years on, we have a new generation of Indians. This generation did not have to face the hardships and the discrimination that their fathers and mothers had to endure. This generation is well educated, most of them graduates and professionals, confidently running their own businesses and practices. A number of them do so on an international scale. In business and finance Asians are an important force in Britain. Our own Koli community has not been lagging behind in any way. Within a couple of years after arriving from East Africa our people set up 'Mandhata Mandals' in each of the cities. In West Bromwich we were perhaps the first community to have bought a church and converted it to Shree Krishna Temple. A few years on we set up an umbrella organisation, 'Association of Mandhata Samaj UK' to bring together all our people at least once or twice a year. Almost all our Mandals now have premises of their own, run Gujarati Language classes and other cultural classes for our children, celebrate religious festivals and generally enjoy all the material comforts.

A visitor to UK and other overseas countries is most likely to get the impression that our community has truly arrived. I have said earlier that our last fifty years in UK is only a partial success. We may have achieved financial independence, but there is lot more to life than money and material comforts.

In Conclusion we cannot wholly blame the upper castes for our present conditions. History records with unceasing regularity the downfall of once powerful people who may have completely disappeared or reduced to pittance. In a world where survival of the fittest is the norm a people has to make great effort and sacrifice to unite under a wise leadership and start writing history again.

We have thousands of graduates and professionals, highly qualified doctors, dentists, lawyers, and skilled technocrats, living in their adopted countries and in India. They all seem to be using their skills to make money and in a race to acquire material goods and other minor pleasures. Material comforts are necessary but our priority must also be to guard our religion, culture and tradition.

The cream of our present generation must see themselves as the torch-bearers of our Samaj and make every effort to communicate, unite and become a formidable force to reclaim our past glory. This is now our challenge.

About the author Keshavlal J Patel is a native of Bodali Gam in Navsari District in Southern Gujarat. He left India to join his father in East Africa in 1948. He has taken keen interest in the welfare of the area and on his second visit to India in 1983 set up Kantha Vibhag Friendship Trust through which he promotes various development projects in our District. Since 1971 he has settled with his family in UK.

In this brief article he has tried to compile historic information that he has collect from various sources and hopes that it will encourage others to research further and add to our glorious heritage.