

Temple of Sri Mahalsa in Verna – Part 1

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This was the temple in Verna, Salcete, destroyed in the year 1567, which we had referred to in the last week: "However, the most elegant of them was dedicated to a woman called Mhalsadevi, who was worshipped in the Mardol neighborhood of Verna village...." What follows is a brief note on that temple.

Let me quote from three sources - Gomes Pereira, [Gomes Pereira, 1978: 'Hindu Temples and Deities'], Mitragotri [Mitragotri, 1992: 'A Socio-Cultural History of Goa From the Bhojas to The Vijayanagara'] and the letter of Fr. Gomes Vaz in 'Documenta Indica' [Wickl (ed), 1962: 'Documenta Indica VII', (1566-1569), Fr. Gomes Vaz S. I., Goa 12 Decembris 1567].

Let me begin by quoting from 'Hindu Temples and Deities of Goa' by Gomes Pereira; "the temple of Mhalsadevi, at Mardol in Verna was so beautiful that Fr. Luis Goes, at whose request the image was destroyed, moved by its grandeur and coolness of the place, tried to preserve that temple to house in it the church of Our Lady of Conception, Queen of Angels. His request, however, was rejected."

At the entrance of the temple of

Verna, Gomes Pereira quotes Gomes Vaz's letter dated December 12, 1567, "there is a chapel or tank with an arched roof similar to that of the Church of Our Lady of Divar, and having a portal of blackstone. Truly, I have not yet seen such a fabulous one, even in Portugal."

The first church of Verna was built at the site of the temple of the deity Santeri and subsequently it was transferred to the site of the old cemetery. At the site of the temple of the deity Mhalsa, a cross was erected for public veneration in order to prevent the same plot of land from returning to the hands of the gentiles who wished to buy it.

The Mahalsa Temple in Verna could have been a part of the fortress of the Desai of Verna. That explains Gomes Pereira's comment: 'temple of Mardol (Verna) was like a Fortress'."

One captain was sent by Adil-Shah. He had come through Ponda, with more than 5,000 men to attack the "tanadarias" administered by Rui de Melo, and for two days laid siege to the Tanador-Mor, Fernao Anes de Souto Maior, in a temple of Mardol (in Verna of Salcete) which was like a fortress. This took place during the rule of Duarte de Meneses (1522-24) [Gomes Pereira, 1978: Hindu Temples and Deities, p. 112]

One point from the note by Gomes

525 Está no meio de hum terreiro lageado maior que toda a noas horta, sobre huns degraus e assento tão alto como dous homens, lavrado e com ameias, onde estavam ma[n]gieries. O sítio do pagode não se pode melhorar; está no baixo da terra em hum chão grande, todo cercado e lageado com grandes lagens, e mais sayndo [366] delle huma rua da mesma maneira ladrihada que vay dar em hum tanque soberano e dos mayores que eu vy. A rua toda hé cercada de poleas altos com assentos e degraus, e detrás por ordem multas arvores; da outra banda se faz huma ponte; acabada, estão humas grandes arbores que cingem todo o chão de sombra, e de huma banda e outra do caminho arbores em ordem. A entrada do pagode está huma ermida ou lavatorio de felçam da abobada de N. Senhora de Divar, com hum portal de pedra preta.

46. Certo que nem em Portugal ateguora vy sítio tam fermoso Wickl (ed), 1962: Documenta Indica VII, (1566-1569), Fr. Gomes Vaz S. I., Goa 12 Decembris 1567

Pereira, though incidental for him, is worth noting. He writes: 'temple of Mardol (Verna) was like a Fortress'. We need to understand this in historical context. Verna was a principal village of Salcete even before the Portuguese; we do not know since when; seems it had been so since very early when chieftains ruled the territory which later became Salcete. We do not have historical records for that; only oral history. We get a clue to it from the fact that some of them were made a 'desai' / 'sardesai' by the Portuguese or earlier rulers. There was another similar desai (sardesai) of Loutulim. This is known from the folk story of Bhagirathi, the daughter of 'desai' of Verna who was married to a son of the 'sardesai' of Loutulim. [Filippe Nery Xavier recounts an interesting tale in 'Gabinete Literário das Fontainhas', Vol 3 (1848), pp.57-58 and in 'Bosquejo Historico Das Comunidades Das Aldeias Dos Concelhos Das Ilhas, Salsete e Bardez, Vol 2 (1907), pp.354-355] It is a historical fact that 'desaido' was a continuation of a system/arrangement that existed prior to the advent of the Portuguese.

According to Couto, around 1500 CE, when Goa was annexed as a part of the Adil Shah kingdom, "the administration was left to the village gamvkar, and ancient chiefs of mahal like sardesai and de-

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sai were confirmed in their offices. ... They were chieftains appointed by the Adil Shah to look after the various mahal. Their duties included maintaining law and order and collecting revenues." [Couto, 2004: Goa: 'A Daughter's Story', p. 80] Couto does not cite any historical sources for this information; it is history as generally accepted. But the description sounds extremely similar to what we have observed in two other contexts.

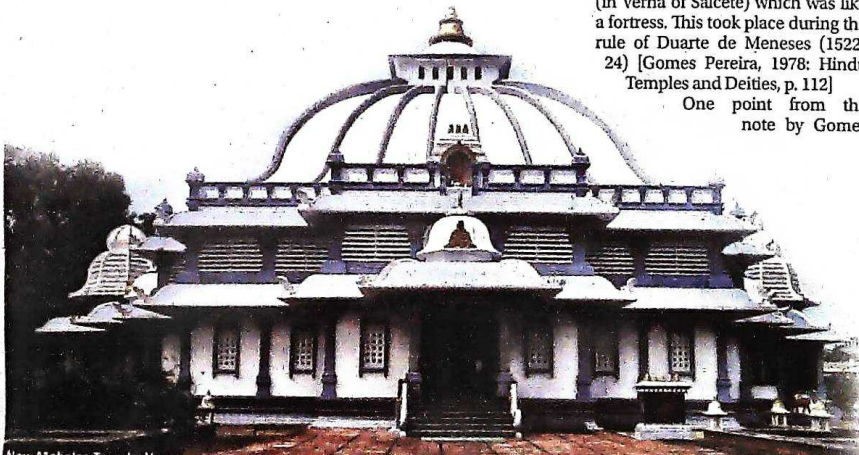
The first was in the context of the gamvkari. We had noted for instance, how the kings appropriated the hegemony generated by the village republics. The terms 'araiyan' in the tamil country and 'arasu' in the Deccan give an interesting insight into this process. Araiyan rose from the ranks of udayan in tamil country, equivalent of odeva or gavud in the Kannad domain, or gauda in Komkni. Aluvarasa I (Aluva+arasu = the arasu of Aluva) was a king from the Alupa (Aluva)

Dynasty who ruled in the early seventh century. The kingdom he ruled was known as Alvakheda Arusasira - 'the principality of the arasu of Aluva'. The Alupas were initially an independent principality, but later became feudatory to the Kadambas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas and Hoysalas.

Probably, the Desai of Verna ruled the territory between the Verna hill range and the sea; while the Desai of Loutulim ruled the territory between the Verna hill range and the River Zuari. The Mahalsa Temple in Verna could have been a part of the fortress of the Desai of Verna. That explains Gomes Pereira's comment: 'temple of Mardol (Verna) was like a Fortress' [Gomes Pereira, p. 112]

Let me now peruse Mitragotri. Mahalsa is one of the important Shakti worshipped in Goa. Mahalsa is a folk deity having her origin in Karnataka region and references are found in Kannada and Marathi literature. References to Mahalsa are also found in Kannada inscriptions and in a Telugu and Sanskrit inscription in North Western Andhra Pradesh. So, clearly Mahalsa appears to have been a folk deity of the people who migrated from the trans-Sahyadri Komkan to the coast when the coast became inhabitable. It is not a bramhanical deity; it was a folk deity raised into bramhanical pantheon, to use a concept that Dhere uses in connection with Sriviththal. [Dhere, 2011; 'The Rise of a Folk God, The Viththal of Pandharpur', xiv] Therefore it is not correct to refer to the original Sri Mahalsa Temple in the Mardol Ward of Verna as a 'Hindu' temple.

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New Mahalsa Temple, Verna