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Commodities and Creed: The Ghat-Konkan Corridor and Religious Syncretism

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Abstract
Trade as an economic activity that involves exchange has been an important aspect of human activity in every society. It is essentially marked with negotiations between different groups. This transaction arises out of the needs of the community involved. Apart from fundamental necessities which give rise to the basic exchange transactions, the geographical, socio-cultural, as well as political factors influence these trade negotiations. Trade does not remain a mere exchange of goods, commodities, and services. It becomes a medium of exchange of ideas, values, beliefs, and cults. "The objective of a study on trade ought finally to locate it in the context of the society in which it takes place as an economic activity." [B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 2003]. The primary aim of this Research Paper is to understand and analyse the nature, structure and factors regulating the trade linkages of Desh and Konkan. Attempts will be made to understand through these linkages between Desh and Konkan how the socio- cultural and religious beliefs of the two distinct regions were shaped. This paper through its investigation of evolving trade networks and emerging nodal centres will try to highlight the growth of religious centres like local Mathas and temple towns. A key focus is the infrastructure connecting these nodes, particularly transport routes. For instance, the 'Ghat' passes of the Sahyadri range are examined as critical conduits facilitating communication and exchange between the Konkan coast, the interior of Maharashtra, and wider regions. Several epigraphic as well as literary records show that Maharashtra Desh and Konkan region shared a symbiotic relationship not only in trade and commerce but also in socio-cultural patterns of human interaction. The present paper proposes to focus on the eco-cultural negotiations between two very significant parts of Maharashtra during early medieval and medieval period. The extent of cultural penetration as a consequence of contacts and social interactions, spread of cults and beliefs would come under the purview of this paper.
***Keywords**: Commodities, Creed, Ghat-Konkan Corridor, Religious Syncretism, Maharashtra*

Introduction

Trade is never merely the movement of goods. Every transaction, every caravan descending a mountain pass, every ship arriving at a coastal port carries within it not only commodities but also conversations, beliefs, and the seeds of cultural transformation. The exchange of material necessities creates the infrastructure—physical and social—through which ideas, rituals, and religious identities travel. This paper examines one such corridor of extraordinary historical significance: the Ghat-Konkan interface of western India during the early medieval and medieval periods (c. 7th to 14th centuries).

Separated by the formidable Sahyadri mountain ranges, the Konkan coast and the Deccan plateau (*Maharashtradesh*) developed distinct ecological, economic, and cultural identities. The coast, with its abundant rainfall and network of natural harbours, specialized in tropical agriculture and maritime trade. The plateau, drier and more dependent on seasonal rains, was a heartland of political power, textile production, and overland commerce. Yet these two regions were not isolated from one another. These two regions shared a symbiotic relationship which went beyond trade and influenced the religious landscape.

The paper argues that the Ghat passes functioned as active conduits for religious transmission by facilitating movements of cults, rituals, devotional literature and enabled syncretic practices between coast and interior. These inter-regional transactions were never one way but rather a

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multi-directional exchange. This Ghat Konkan corridor enabled creation of a shared sacred geography transcending ecological boundaries. Merchants, monks, pastoral communities, and pilgrims not only sustained trade networks but also acted as agents of religious transmission. The commodities like coconuts, betel leaves, textiles, sandalwood, incense were not merely transported but these became carriers of religious / spiritual ideas and beliefs thus, making the infrastructure of commerce, the infrastructure of faith.

The Corridor as Infrastructure

The Sahyadri range, running parallel to the western coast, presents a formidable barrier between Konkan and Desh. However, the mountains were interspersed with numerous passes called ghats that for over a millennium provided passage for travellers, traders, and armies. These passes acted as nodes of connectivity and their importance is underlined by the existence of religious settlements that nestled around them.

Bhaje caves is an excellent example of such a strategic position enjoyed by this settlement. It is located 3 km from the Bhorghat. It is documented in archaeological surveys and the pioneering research of D. D. Kosambi that Bhaje caves were not just an isolated monastic settlement, but a part of an extensive monastic network of Buddhists stretching from Nashik and Junnar on the plateau and Kanheri near the sea coast. Merchants ascending or descending the ghats not only found shelter but spiritual solace and guidance; they reciprocated through generous patronage.

We find that this pattern was replicated across the region. The ***Kanheri* Caves**, lay near the ancient ports of *Sopara* and *Kalyan*. The ***Kuda-Mandad*** caves were situated adjacent to the port of *Mandagora* (modern Bankot/Janjira), a centre for teak extraction and shipbuilding. Monasteries and temples were situated where people moved, where goods were stored, where caravans halted and ships anchored.

The Communities of Movement

The corridor was animated by specific communities whose livelihoods depended on mobility. Among the most significant were the **Banjara** (also known as *Brinjari*) cattle-keepers and grain merchants. Crawford's *Legends of The Konkan* (1909) provides vivid testimony of "bullocks driven by brinjaris from across the Sahyadri descending into the Konkan plains," carrying grain from the plateau and returning with salt and coconuts from the coast.

The epigraphic evidence from the early historic period records the movement of merchant communities, members of guilds (*Shrenis*) and *Sarthavahas*, the agents of trading corporations. Inscriptions record donations by such individuals at Buddhist sites across the Deccan. These merchant collectives became so powerful during the early medieval period that they became patrons capable enough of commissioning major religious monuments without royal intervention.

Patronage and Religious Landscape

Recent studies on the north Konkan help enhance our understanding of early medieval religious patronage. Pia Brancaccio's study of the sixth- and seventh-century Śaiva cave temples—Elephanta, Jogeśvarī, Maṇḍapeśvar, and Mahāḍ—challenges the assumption that such monumental projects necessarily required royal sponsorship. Instead, Brancaccio demonstrates that these sites were likely supported by "multiple, corporate patronage networks consisting of merchants, traders, and other local collectives" who dominated the port polity of Northern Konkan.

This finding suggests that the merchant communities were not passive donors responding to royal initiative but were active agents of religious patronage. They were carriers of their devotional preference along these trade routes. With passage of time and changing religious preferences the same mercantile community which once funded Buddhist monasteries now started patronising the Śaiva cave temples at the coastal ports. The religious affiliations may have changed but it did not alter the infrastructure of patronage.

The Stratified Sacred Landscape

The religious landscape of the Ghat-Konkan corridor was not characterized by replacement but by accretion. New traditions settled alongside old ones, creating a stratified sacred geography visible even today.

Padana Hill in Goregaon has inscriptions dating from the first to 6th century CE which document

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the coexistence of Vaishnava and Buddhist practitioners within the same locale. Buddhism and allusion to Siddhas are visible at the same place. Though this was not syncretism in the sense of theological blending it was a pluralistic landscape where multiple traditions occupied the same sacred space.

Another significant example is Panhale-Kaji caves which represents a more complex case of such religious transition. It is located off the coast near a river tributary. It has been identified by James Mallinson (2019) as a site of *Vajrayana* Buddhist tradition gradually transitioning into *Nātha* Śaivism. The site, described in later medieval texts as an affluent centre, exemplifies the fluid boundaries between Buddhist and Śaiva traditions in the corridor.

The Shilahara Synthesis (11th–13th Centuries)

The Shilahara dynasties ruled in three branches across North Konkan, South Konkan, and Kolhapur. They institutionalized the patronage patterns that had emerged over preceding centuries.

The North Konkan Shilaharas commissioned major Śaiva monuments including the Walkeshwar Temple and Banganga Tank in Mumbai under King Chittaraja, and the Shiv Mandir at Ambernath. Simultaneously, they patronized Buddhist and Jain institutions. The South Konkan Shilaharas, who ruled from the port of Goa, also followed the suit.

The Shilahara courts did not enforce religious uniformity. Their patronage strategies reflected the diverse religious affiliations of the merchant communities, agrarian elites, and urban populations they governed.

Ritual Exchange and Syncretic Forms: The Shared Śaiva Horizon

The sixth and seventh centuries witnessed the emergence of a distinctive Śaiva sacred geography spanning the Ghat-Konkan corridor. The cave temples of Elephanta and *Jogeśvarī*, separated by approximately forty kilometres and belonging to different political jurisdictions, nonetheless display remarkable consistency in their rituals. Both emphasize the cosmic aspects of Śiva—the *Trimurti* at Elephanta being the supreme expression of this theology—and both centre their liturgical space around the veneration of the *liṅga*. This consistency was not coincidental. It reflects the movement of Śaiva *ācāryas* and ritual specialists along the trade routes, carrying with them the liturgical knowledge, iconographic conventions, and theological frameworks necessary for temple foundation and consecration. The merchants who funded these establishments were active participants in the transmission of devotional practices, carrying their chosen deities from the ports where they conducted business to the Ghat passes where they established monasteries.

Goddess Traditions: From the Ghats to the Coast

The medieval period witnessed the proliferation of goddess cults across the corridor. Many goddess traditions that came to define coastal religious life originated in the Ghat regions and the Deccan plateau, travelling westward through the passes to establish themselves in maritime settlements.

The cult of **Renukā-Yellamma** provides the most compelling example. Originating in the Ghat regions of southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka, the goddess's worship spread through the passes connecting Kolhapur to the Konkan coast. The distinctive rituals associated with her veneration—including the traditions of dedicated devotees (*jogatis*, *jogammas*)—found expression in coastal temples that adapted Ghat traditions to maritime contexts. The goddess who protected pastoral communities on the plateau came also to protect fishing communities on the coast.

Similarly, the ***saptamātṛkā*** (seven mothers) traditions that appear in coastal temples show clear affinities with Deccan sculptural conventions. The fierce, protective aspect of these goddesses—armed, warlike, presiding over cremation grounds—resonated both with the warrior cultures of the plateau and with maritime communities who faced the perils of seafaring, piracy, and the unpredictable sea.

Tantric Currents and Esoteric Exchange

The liminal spaces of the corridor—the isolated forests of the Ghats, the boundary-zones of coastal ports—proved especially receptive to tantric traditions. Panhale-Kaji becomes an important

location. Mallinson's evidence shows that Buddhist, Śaiva, and Nātha traditions actively blended rather than just coexisting. The transmission of tantric initiatory lineages between the Ghats and the coast is shown by the presence of *Yogeśvarī* iconography and the emphasis on *siddhis* (supernatural powers). Traditions that promised supernatural intervention were naturally supported by merchants, whose business enterprises depended on favourable winds, safe passage, and protection from shipwreck and piracy.

Across the corridor, the Nātha tradition found fertile ground with its emphasis on *haṭha yoga*, and the conquest of death. Numerous locations in the Ghats and the Konkan are connected to the mythical character of Gorakhnāth and his followers. For societies whose bodies were subjected to the rigours of long-distance travel, the tradition's emphasis on making it immune to illness, ageing, and injury—had clear appeal. One of the most advanced methods of ritual transmission along these pathways was the sharing of esoteric knowledge between inner monastic centres and coastal ports.

Vernacular Bhakti: The Poetic Exchange

The medieval period witnessed the flowering of vernacular devotional movements across the Deccan, and the Ghat-Konkan corridor served as a crucial channel for their transmission. The worship of *Viṭṭhal* at Pandharpur is the focal point of the *Vārkarī* tradition, which is typically treated as an internal phenomenon of the Deccan plateau. However, its impact reached the Konkan through the same passages that transported textiles and grain.

Marathi-speaking people along the coast circulated the *abhaṅgas* of the Vārkarī saints, namely *Jnaneshwar*, *Namdev*, *Eknath*, and *Tukaram*. Originally a deity of the parched plateau, the worship of Viṭṭhal created beachheads in coastal communities that were tailored to local devotional sensitivities and marine rhythms. On the other hand, devotional poetry written in the Ghat regions was influenced by the nautical experiences of Konkani populations. The sea, the monsoon, the fishing boat, and the perilous voyage were all added to the vocabulary of bhakti, enhancing and broadening its variety of metaphors.

Syncretic Forms and Shared Sacred Sites

In the Konkan, the cult of *Khaṇḍobā*, the hunting deity of the Deccan plateau, created important centres where his devotion took on distinctly maritime characteristics. Fishermen and sailors are shielded by the same god who rides a horse across the Ghats. His celebrations, which were initially timed to the plateau's agricultural calendar, eventually coordinated with the monsoon and fishing seasons.

Another aspect of this trade is represented by the Muslim *Pīr* shrines scattered throughout the Konkan coast. Many of these dargahs can trace their spiritual origins to Sufi saints who established shrines that developed into hubs of interfaith devotion after crossing the Ghats from the Deccan. These shrines' ceremonies, which include the offering of cloth, the tying of threads (*dhaga*), and the request for intervention for protection, fertility, and healing, exhibit striking similarities to those seen in Hindu temples. This is a shared ritual substrate, a common language of blessing and supplication that cuts beyond formal religious boundaries, rather than syncretism as a formal theological synthesis. Dabhol was a centre of trade under the Shahs of Bijapur. It was known as the Mecca-port whence members of the royal family and lay Muslims sailed to the holy land-Mecca. (Apte 1972; 14).

Lanja in Ratnagiri district offers a living example. The *Urus* at the grave of Syed Chand Bukhari Ali Faqir, established approximately five hundred years ago, is attended annually by "people of different communities." Here, at a site where petroglyphs attest to the prehistoric antiquity of the route and Brahmanical caves document early medieval religious activity, contemporary practice preserves the multi-communal character that has defined the corridor for millennia.

Economic Foundations of Religious Exchange

Commodities from the Coast

The Konkan's contribution to the corridor's economy was shaped by its tropical climate and maritime location. Under the Shilaharas and subsequent polities, the coast produced and exported:

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- **Betel leaves** (*pan*): A high-value, perishable cash crop requiring careful transport
- **Coconut**: For consumption, oil extraction, and coir manufacture
- **Rice**: The Konkan's reliable rainfall enabled rice cultivation that supplemented the plateau's more uncertain harvests
- **Areca nut** (*betel nut*): Cultivated in the coastal belt and lower Ghat slopes
- **Timber**: Teak and ebony from the Ghat forests, essential for shipbuilding and construction
- **Sandalwood**: Sourced from Mysore and transhipped through Konkan ports
- **Incense and perfumes**: Manufactured or compounded in coastal towns like Thana and Saimur, combining local and imported ingredients

These commodities moved upward through the Ghat passes, carried by Banjaras and merchant caravans, exchanged in the weekly marts (*hats*) and temple fairs that dotted the interior landscape.

Commodities from the Plateau

The Deccan hinterland supplied goods of equal value:

- **Textiles**: Calicoes and other cotton cloths, produced in weaving centres across the plateau
- **Dyes**: Indigo, a high-value commodity in both Indian and international markets
- **Luxury fabrics**: Silk, produced or traded through Deccan networks
- **Saltpetre**: Potassium nitrate, essential for gunpowder manufacture and increasingly important in the medieval period
- **Sugar**: Processed from sugarcane cultivated in river valleys
- **Grain**: The agricultural surplus of the plateau, exchanged for coastal salt and coconuts

This was a connection of complimentary specialization rather than core and periphery. The merchants who mediated this commerce amassed the wealth that supported religious organizations on both sides of the Ghats, and each region's surplus covered the other's deficit.

The Urban Transition

The cumulative impact of this trade was evident in the urban morphology of coastal communities by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The physical fabric of ports like Rajapur, Vengurla, Chaul, Dabhol, Vasai, Thane, and Karwar was altered by the homes, warehouses, and commercial buildings that supported the trade in pepper, calicoes, indigo, and silk. Vengurla allowed the Dutch to enter the Bijapur Sultanate's textile markets, while the Adil Shahs dominated trade through Chaul to reach northern Konkan.

The physical space where many populations interacted was made possible by this urban growth. Merchants, sailors, artisans, and labourers from various linguistic, regional, and religious backgrounds negotiated social interactions as well as prices in markets, waterfronts, and commercial avenues. Konkan ports' cosmopolitan nature was a social reality and economic phenomenon with significant effects on religious life.

Conclusion: The Ritual Corridor

The evidence assembled in this paper permits several conclusions about the relationship between trade and religious change in the Ghat-Konkan corridor.

The mobility of cults, ritual experts, and devotional customs was made possible by the same passages that allowed the transportation of goods. Roads, passes, ports, and markets—the infrastructure of commerce—were also the infrastructure of faith.

Secondly, religious transmission occurred in multiple directions. This data refutes the notion that religious transformation moves from "centres" to "peripheries." From the plateau to the coast and from the coast to the plateau, Śaiva customs migrated. Goddess cults first appeared in marine communities after emerging from the Ghats. Tantric lineages moved between monasteries in the interior and coastal ports. While Konkani Sea imagery enhanced the poetry of the plateau, Vārkarī bhakti permeated the Konkan. All-way traffic was made possible by the corridor.

Rather than having watertight boundaries, religious identities in the corridor were defined by coexistence and fluidity. This was undoubtedly syncretism in practice—communities of various

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affiliations using the same places of worship, supporting the same organizations, and taking part in the same celebrations—but it was not syncretism in the sense of methodical theological blending.

The networks of corporate sponsorship that supported Elephanta and Jogeśvarī show that commercial collectives had the resources and the power to commission significant religious monuments without the need for royal initiative. Along the trade routes, these businessmen brought their religious inclinations with them, building monasteries at the passes where their caravans stopped and temples at the ports where they conducted business. They were largely responsible for creating the corridor's religious landscape.

Despite significant religious change, the corridor has amazing continuity. In the thirteenth century CE, pilgrims travelled to Pandharpur via the Bhor Ghat, which had transported traders to Bhaje in the second century BCE. In the fifteenth century, Sufi Pīrs arrived in the port of Chaul, which had attracted Buddhist monks in the first. The corridor persisted despite the shifting goods and ideologies. Thus, the Ghat-Konkan corridor provides a unique example of religious transformation: coexistence rather than isolation, continuity rather than rupture, and accretion rather than replacement. It captures the essence of the communities that supported it: traders who risked their lives and means of subsistence on the prospect of safe travel, trade, and reciprocal gain. Along with coconuts and calicoes, their caravans also carried prayers, poetry, rituals, beliefs, gods, and goddesses. The ritual landscape turned into a corridor, and the corridor turned into a ritual landscape.

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