

SPECIAL PROJECT

TRADITIONAL OPEN SPACES

(The Koli Community)

Guide

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1989-91, sixth batch.

Guide.....

Examiner.....

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Preface

In the premier city of India live the Kolis, a fishing community, possessing a distinctive culture of its own.

They are one of the earliest inhabitants of Bombay. The people are lively, full of enthusiasm and having a zest for life. These honest and God fearing children of the sea constitute an important part of Maharashtra's life. Although due to the constant and intimate contact with urban groups the Koli culture has undergone change, the process of adopting foreign traits has been gradual and selective. The core of their tradition and culture has been preserved.

Some of the areas covered by me are the etymology, early history, internal structure, marriage, divorce, child birth, religion, social status and the types of open spaces, with the activities that take place within them.

Etymology

Some believe, that the word Kol' is derived from 'Kul' meaning 'clan' as distinguished from the word 'Kunbi' meaning 'Family.'

The members of the tribe claim descent from Walmiki, the author of the Ramayana. Others believe them to be Kiratas-hunters spoken of in the Puranas as the offspring of Nishad, who was sprung from the arms of the Solar king Vena. However, these stories throw little light on the origin of the tribe.

Early History

The reference to the Kolis was made in the year 1340, When Modh. Tughlac found the fort Kondana, or the present day Sinhagadh, about 10 miles from Poone, in the hands of a Koli chief. The Kolis were left almost independent under their own hereditary chiefs or Naiks. The Koli country that once belonged to Maharashtra was referred to as the Bhavan Mavals, or Fifty two valleys, each of these Mavals was ruled by an independent Naik.

It is surprising to know that these cheerful Kolis were, one time troublesome bandits, during the later part of the eighteenth century these Kolis ravaged the country with their notorious activities. It took nearly 20 years to bring them to order. In 1829; Ramji Bhangaria and Rama Kirwa, the most dangerous-Koli bandits at that time. Years later these war like Kolis were brought to book, many joined the army

They were good in the drill, and could easily walk 30 to 40 miles with ammunition on the hills. Much later the kolis became farmers and fisherfolk. Today a koli is seen peacefully rowing his boat to the tune of the ' Dev mazaa Malhari '.

Internal Structure

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The Kolis are divided into several endogamous Sub-Tribes, Broadly looking they are the Son Kolis and the Mahadev Kolis. The kolis take their name from the God Malhari, whom they revere as their tutelary deity. They are also called ' Panbharirs ' or the water carriers, the Mahadev kolis have twenty-four exogamous septs each of which is further divided into a number of surnames or sub-sections, (List can be found in Pg.395, of 'The castes and Tribes' by Sayed Hassan.)

Marriage

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Girls are married as infants or at sixteen to eighteen years of age. Sex before marriage is not encouraged, unlike the Warli Tribe.

On the wedding day, the bridegroom's party march to the bride's house. On arrival, the groom is seated under the wedding canopy. When the bride arrives, both are made to stand opposite each other and a curtain is held between them. Rice, coloured in turmeric is thrown on their heads. The Brahman reads the sacred texts or 'mantras' purporting that the bridal pair have now become husband and wife.

Divorce

Divorce is permitted with the sanction of the tribal panchayat, the divorced women are allowed to remarry.

Child Birth

Koli women are unclean for twelve days after child birth at the end of the twelfth day, both the child are bathed on the floor, after which fresh cowdung is smeared on the floor to dry. The ceremony of 'Chhatti' is performed for propitiating the Goddess Satwai, mostly on the sixth day.

Religion

In religion, the Kolis differ very little from other communities of the same social position. their patron deity is Mahadev, in whose name a fast is observed on Mahashivratri, or the 14th of the dark half of Magh (end of February), and offerings of milk, flowers and bil leaves are made. The other Gods are Bharaiba of Sovari (Ahmadnagar), Devi of Tuljapur (Nizam Territory) and Khandoba of Jejuri (Poona) Among the minor Gods are Daryabai, Ghorpaddevi, Gunavir, Hiroba, Kalsubai, Mhasoba, and Navlai.

Social Status

Socially the Kolis rank below the Maratha Kunbis, Kapus and Gollas and above the tehParit, Nahavi and the lowest unclean classes. They indulge in spirituous and fermented liquors, and eat fowl, fish, mutton and venison.

Occupation

Little is known about the original occupation of the Kolis. In the eighteenth century they had taken to farming, However a great many of them are involved directly or indirectly to fishing. Of late years the Kolis have entered Government services.

Community Structure, Life and Gatherings

The Kolis are a patriarchal group. It is headed by the man, the family of Kolis live by sharing the burden of the work. The old live with the young ones, the family life consists of grandparents, son and wife and kids, some time one finds four to five generations living in one house.

The men gather together in the evening to talk market trends, cultural moments or village gossip. The women gather in the morning on the way to the market to discuss various things. The gathering can be classified at three levels, the house level, the group level, and the community level. The gathering at the community level is when they hold the fairs;

the 'tamasha', the 'hagama' and the 'lezim'. These subjects have been explained in detail ahead.

Open Spaces in the village.

The Kolis had a number of open spaces in the past, there was a space reserved for the 'Tamasha', a popular entertainment even to this day, another space for fairs and 'Bohada' a speechless performance. These places are also used for 'lezim' and 'kakada' a very popular sport even today.

The kolis have settled in the coast in 1850's, since then the kolis have undergone change, The rapid growth of their tribe coupled with the pressure of landlords and builders a large area of Koli land is bought over. But the Kolis go on...

growing urban milieu has changed the structure and usage of the traditional open space. The village that once had an open space allocated for each festival and sport, today has a clutter of houses, sticking to each other.

Activities in a Traditional Open Space

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| - 'Kakada' | - 'Bohada' or the holy fairs |
| - 'Tamasha' | - 'Khel' or evening games |
| - Education in oral form | |
| - 'Ganesh Chaturti' | |
| - 'Lezim' | |
| - 'Hagama' or wrestling | |

Versova-Wesava

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The versova village is one of the finest examples of a kolu village, in today's context. This village, was once a very large koli settlement nearly eight times its size today. The Wesavas have been very selective in adopting foreign traits. The versova village, has the Sonkolis and the Mahadev Kolis. In other Koli villages the Kolis have converted themselves to the Christian faith.

Each of the Koli village shows signs of being 'squeezed', There are many fragmented villages in the Metropolis, some of them are, Sashoon Docks, Colaba, Cuff Parade crossing Mahim Highway, Versova, Madh Island, Marine, Manorei Gorei belt and Mandava.

Activity Description

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Kakada : The kakada is usually played on the Rangapanchami. It is so called from the article that is to be concealed by one party and to be detected by the other. Adult males are equally divided into two teams. A wooden post is set up at a convenient spot, a square piece of cloth is twisted into what is called the kakada, and is given in the hands of the leader of the team that begins. All men in this team take their hands behind their backs and start to fiddle, to confuse the opponent the kakada is slowly passed on from hand to hand, when its time for the guess, the opponent guesses. If the guess is wrong the man with the closest proximity to the pole jumps towards it. If the guess is right the opponent jumps towards the pole, thus the team that sends the man closest to the pole wins!

Tamasha : Tamasha is a very popular recreational activity, it consists of around seven members, the minimum of five members. There is a dancer, a drummer, a comedian and other two keeping tune. One of the instrument used in the Tamasha is unique, its the 'Tuntune' its a single string instrument. There is also a set of small cymbals and a tambourine.

The dancer is usually a boy , because the Kolis do not like to see there women folk do such a performance.

Education - Oral Tradition : A Koli is a honest value based, God fearing soul. Much of his learning is acquired through the oral tradition. The stories of the Gods, the values of the people, the tricks of the fishing and general education, is imparted by the elders to the younger audience. The open spaces play an important role.

Ganesh Chaturti : This is a very important festival today, may be lord Ganesha may not have been their deity at all, but today almost every koli has adapted himself at this occasion. It is celebrated with great pomp and splendor.

'Ganpatti Bappa Morriya' is sung with great zeal during the immersion ceremony. Here one can observe, how a festival can be an acquired influence.

Lezim : This is considered to be an important sport of the Kolis. It is played mostly as a side show or accompaniment of many festivals. The drum keeps the timing for the Lezim. The Lezim basically is a foot long stick, where a chain is attached to the either ends of it , the chain has many small cymbals to it, so when it is pulled or pushed it makes a sound.

Hagama-Wrestling : This is another recreational activity of the Kolis which again is a open space activity. The wrestling bouts here are called 'Hagama', it is held at principal festivals and is a regular feature in the 'Bohada' or the fairs. Bohada - Holy Fairs: The Gods such as 'Bahiroba and Kaloba' are felicitated in such holy fairs. One of the main feature of this fair is a speechless performance of some Pauranic theme presented by a group of actors - This is called Bohada, from where it gets its name.

Khel - Evening Games : This is also an important activity of the koli, after a hard day he relaxes by playing games in these openspaces. The open space in the front of his house is also used to play indoor games like 'lamddi' which is a mat and coins game.

Hierarchy of Open Spaces at the village

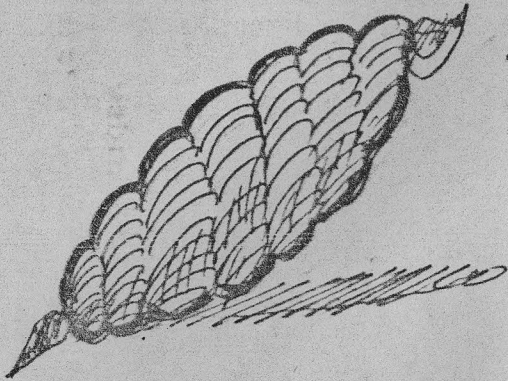
There are various types of openspaces in the Koli village. There were many more spaces in the past, these have shrunk by the pressure of builders.

The different spaces can be classified into Three Levels...

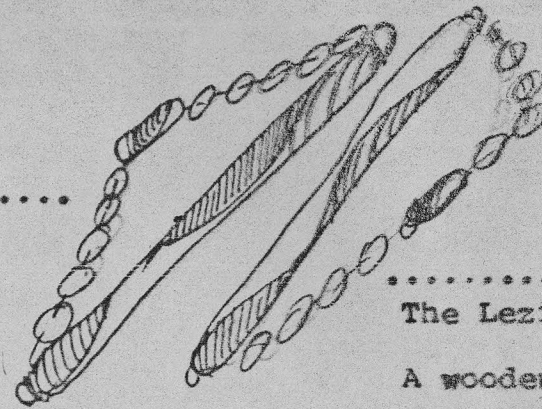
A) The House

B) The Group

C) The Community

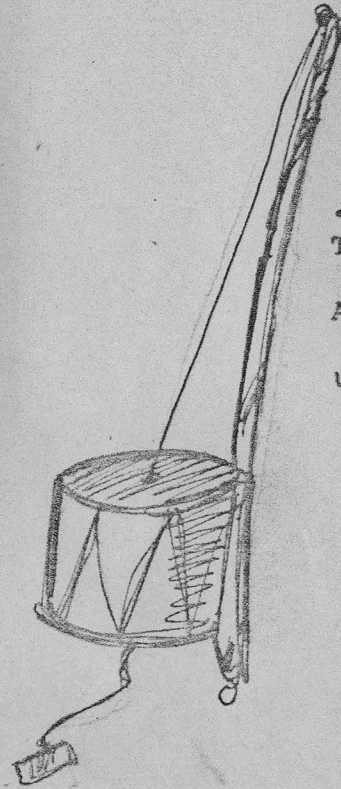


The Kakada - A square
cloth folded and rolled.
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The Lezim-

A wooden bar with
metal cybals.



.....
The Tutune-

A single string instrument
used for the Tamasha.

The House: There is an open space in front of every house, this is the meeting place
.....
for visitors who come home. This space articulates the personality of the house
it has the photographs and paintings of the ancestors. The woman also grinds the
'masala' here. The doors of the Koli house are always open, it is a testimony of
their friendliness and hospitality. They also play indoor games here, the old just
sit and gaze at the passersby.

The Group : The open space allotted to the group gathering are not there anymore,
.....
however, today the group gathers at places that have formed naturally. If there
is an intersection of a road with a seating arrangement it becomes a convenient
place for a group gathering. In the monsoons now so all the boats are dried on
the sea shore, here I noticed the group gathering. The group gathering, comprises
of only men or only women. The men gather to discuss market trends, village
politics, or other important matters. These group meetings have a secondary
function, they build the culture of the place by introducing and deleting
norms, in the social, economic or the culture context.

The Community: This gathering is the largest congregation, apart from being the most
.....
interesting. The feasts, festivals, fairs and sports could be categorised in this
section. The Tamasha, Lezim, Kakada, Bohada, Chaturty are some of the effective examples
of group gathering. At such gatherings exchanges are at a multilevel.
Matrimony, social, cultural and economic ties are strengthened and formed on such an
occasion.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Bombay being the premier city of India there is always an influx of people. The increase in the urban milieu has been a load to the increasing Koli population. The kolias have so far conserved their culture.

The disappearance of open spaces have been in all the Koli villages of Bombay.

Versova has lost a lot of its land to the rich builders.

The spaces that belonged to the group and community have been used for housing.

Apart from the attack of foreign traits, the Koli life itself is being 'squeezed'

The open space is significant because it binds the Koli together. The young and the old interact and live together, because the activities that take place in the space is conducive for the Koli bond.

The attack and removal of an open space is the removal of the Bohada, Hagama, Tamasha and Kakada from the face of the Koli life.

The constant and intimate contact with urban groups the Koli culture has undergone change, the process of adopting foreign traits has been gradual and selective. Therefore the power that be, should stop the pressure on these villages by the forces that destroy their tradition.

A number of Kolis today are working in Govt. enterprises, There should also be an allocation of land for the Kolis to enable them to harness their traditions...if it is not done soon all will forget the wonderful traditions of the sandy shores Versova is calling for Help.!!!!



This is the only stretch of land, that can stage the
'Bohada' or the 'Tamasha'.



This is also an example of the close knit KOLI family.
The two generations are seen working together, many such
examples are illustrated in my slide presentation.



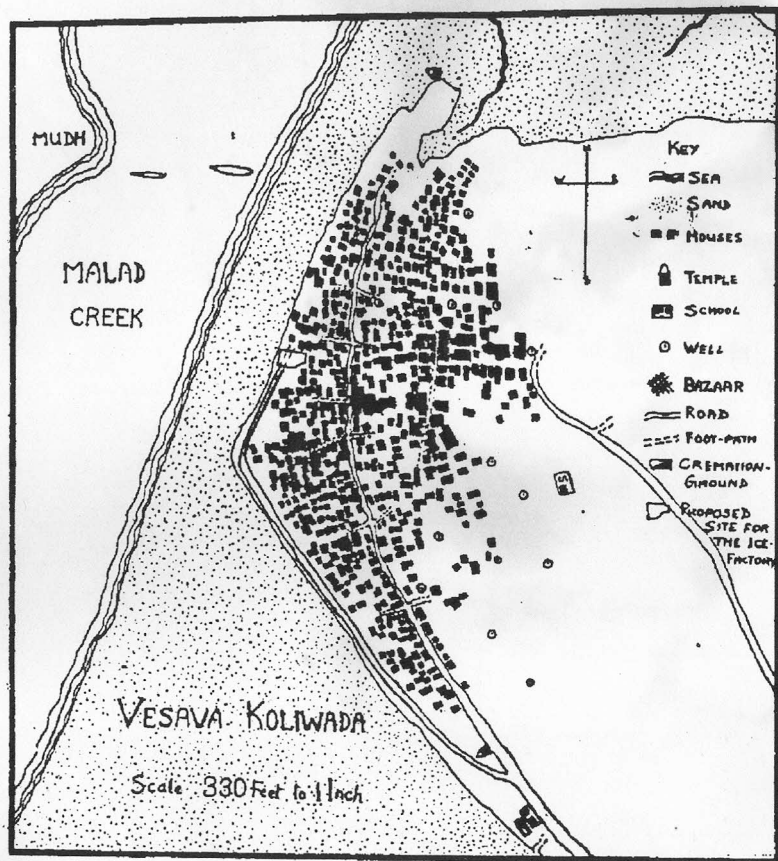
These are the Son and the Mahadev Kolis.
The evening is spent in such cramped spaces, the men chat
or play games here, this could be described as a
open space for a group.



Here is a Son Koli taking a break. The Kolis spend time weaving nets and mending boats in the monsoon.

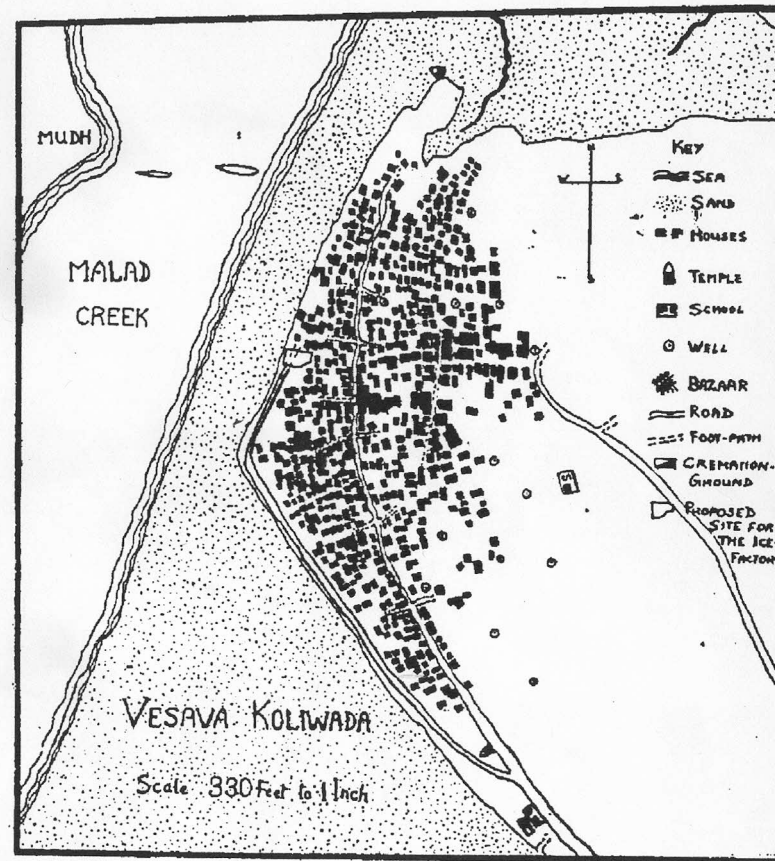


This is Vinayak Bhanduk from the Son Koli community.
He works in a bank, during the monsoon he follows his
family profession.



The lay-out of the Versova Son Koli settlement

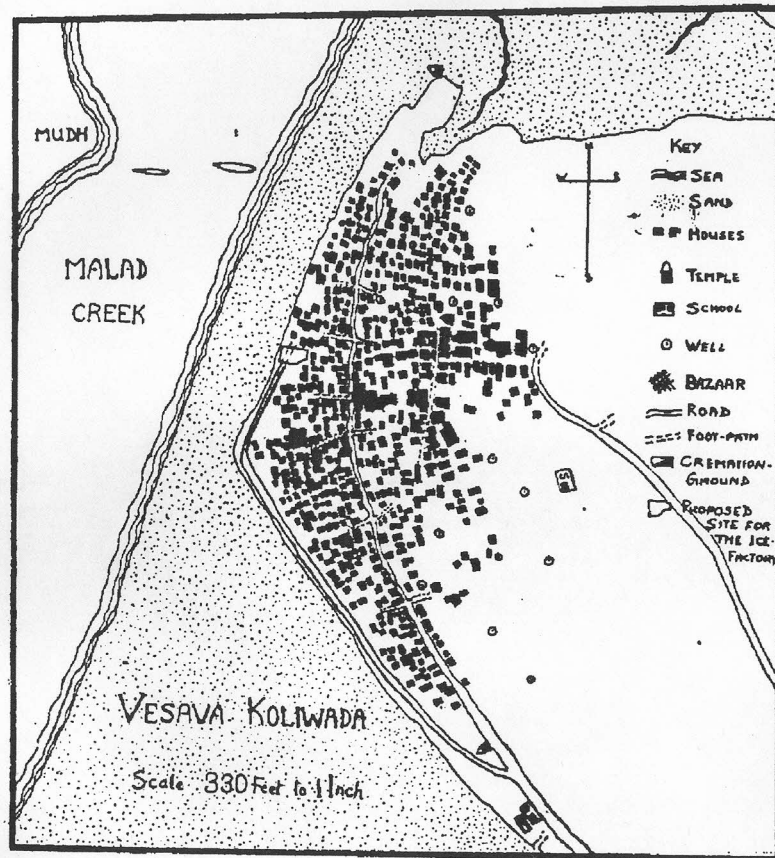
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The lay-out of the Versova Son Koli settlement

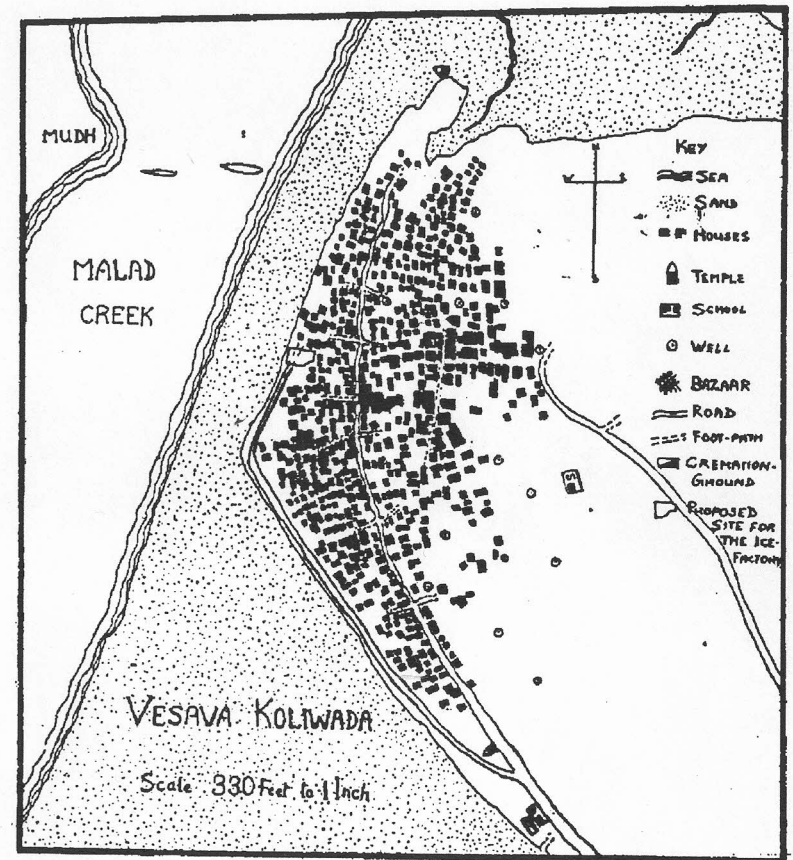
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The lay-out of the Versova Son Koli settlement

1980

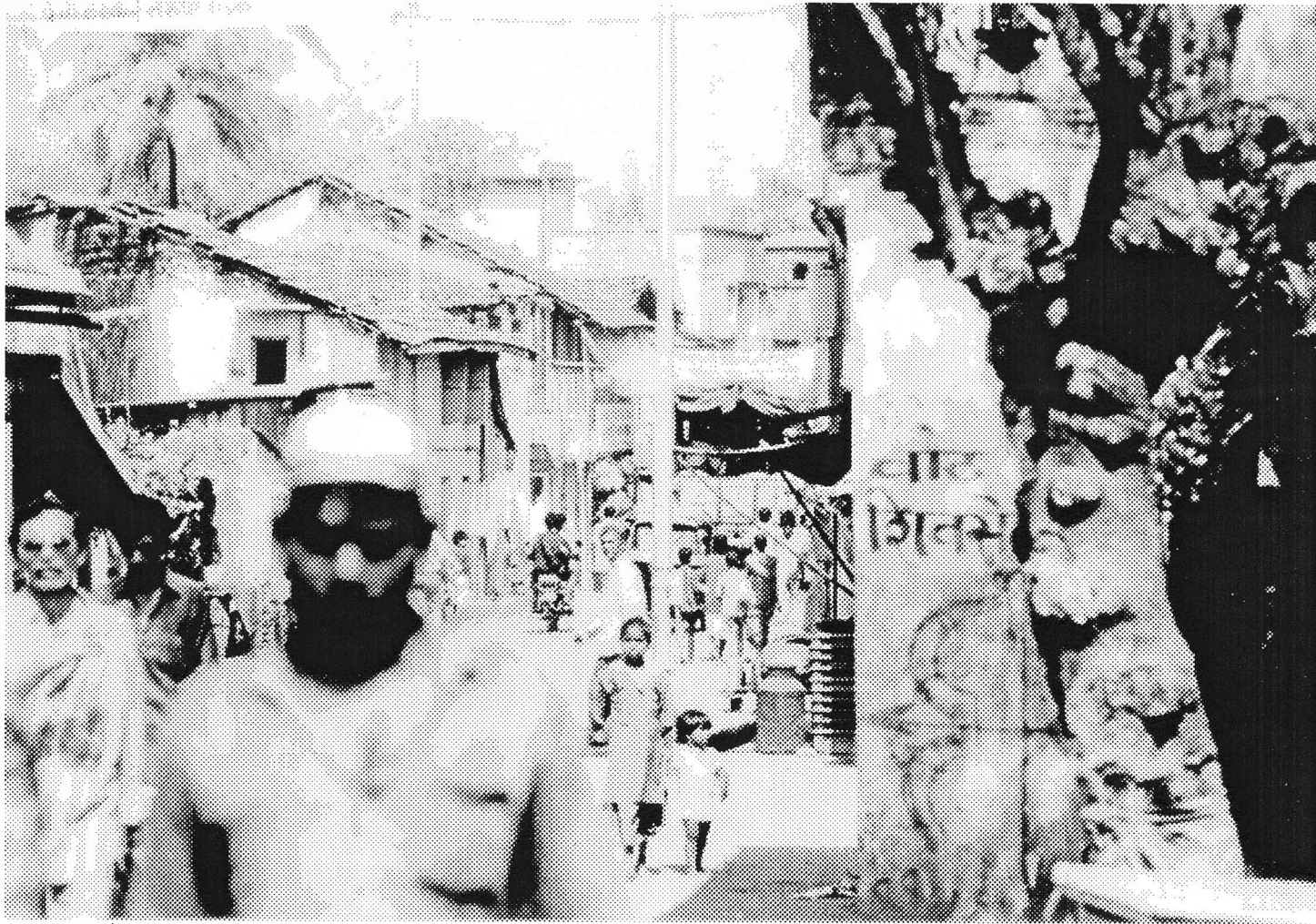


The lay-out of the Versova Son Koli settlement

1990

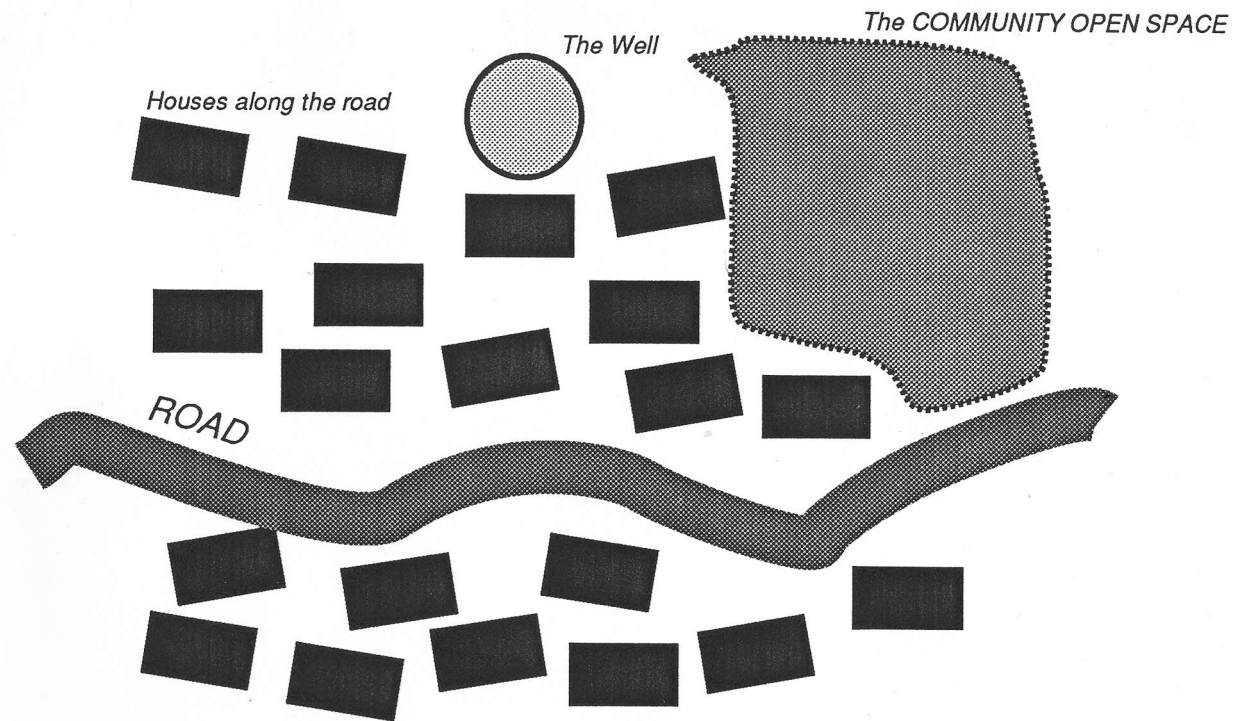


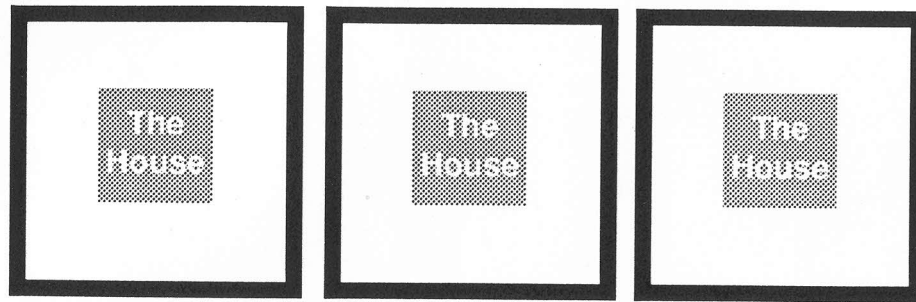
The only open space available to the kolis today. This space is used for all the activities. In the monsoons the same place is used for drying the boats.



This is the characteristic Koli village as seen today. The village has a narrow road with houses on either sides. The advent of landlords and real estate builders have deprived the Koli of his open spaces.

In spite of this clutter, much of the activities held in the open spaces are organised.

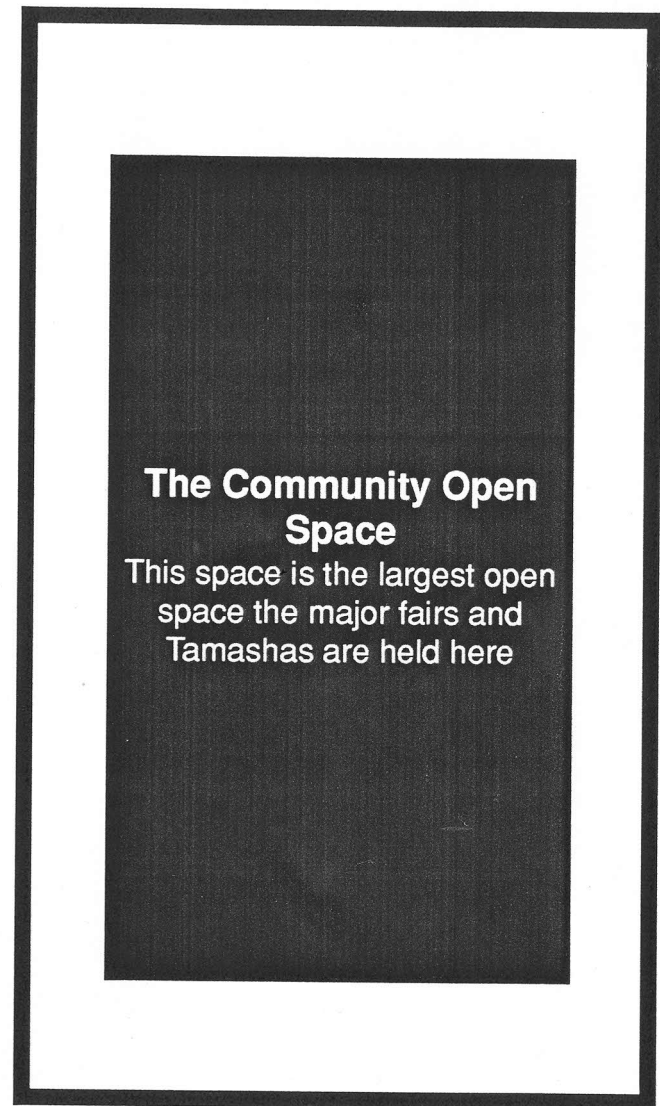
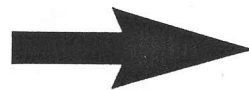
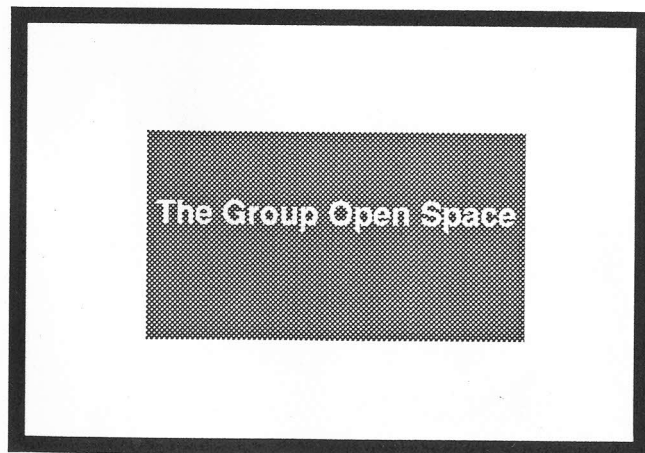




Open space
outside or
around the
house

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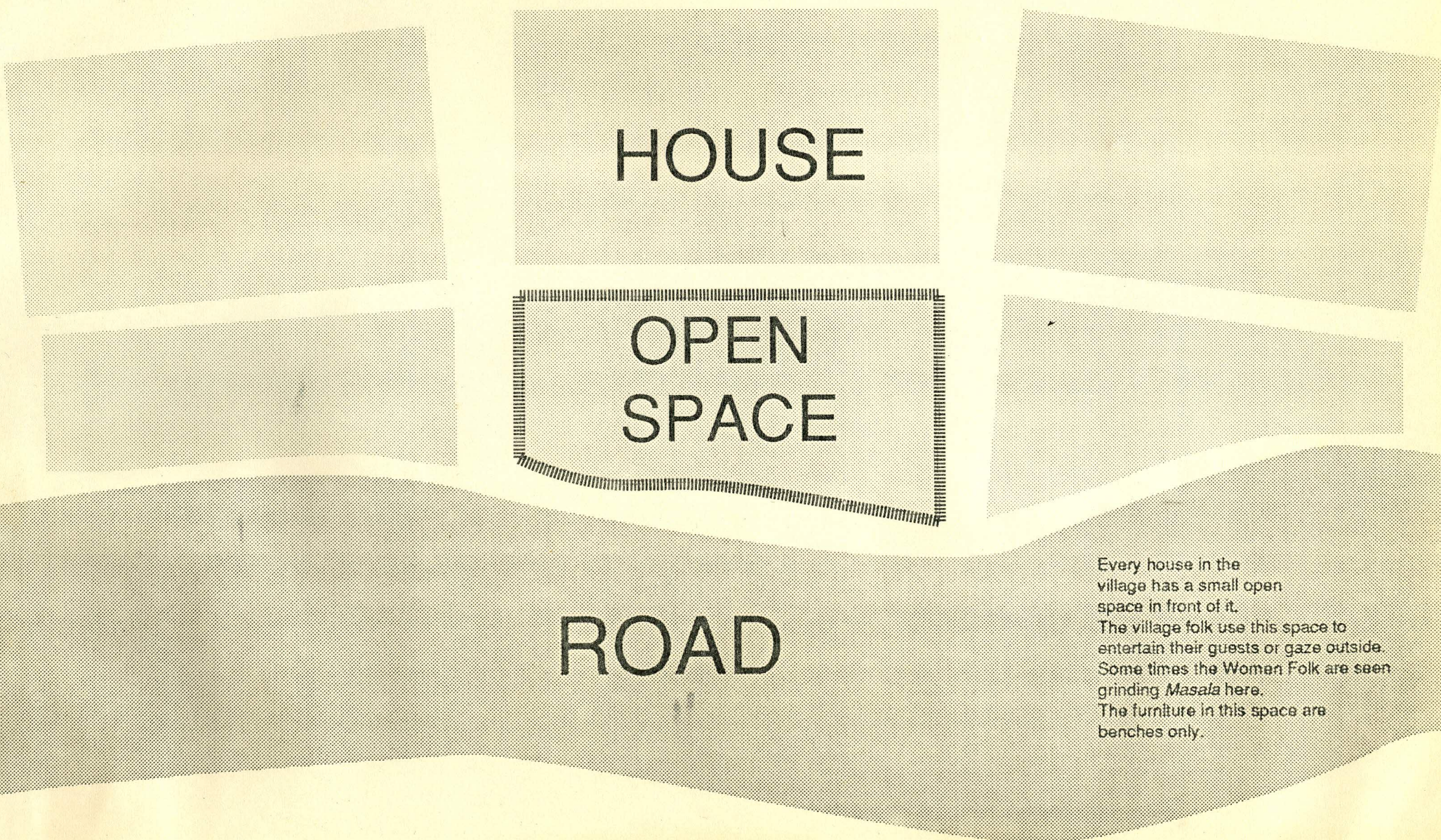
Open space
outside or
around the
house



The Community Open Space

This space is the largest open
space the major fairs and
Tamashas are held here

The Open Space in front of the Koli House



HOUSE

OPEN
SPACE

ROAD

Every house in the village has a small open space in front of it. The village folk use this space to entertain their guests or gaze outside. Some times the Women Folk are seen grinding *Masala* here. The furniture in this space are benches only.

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