

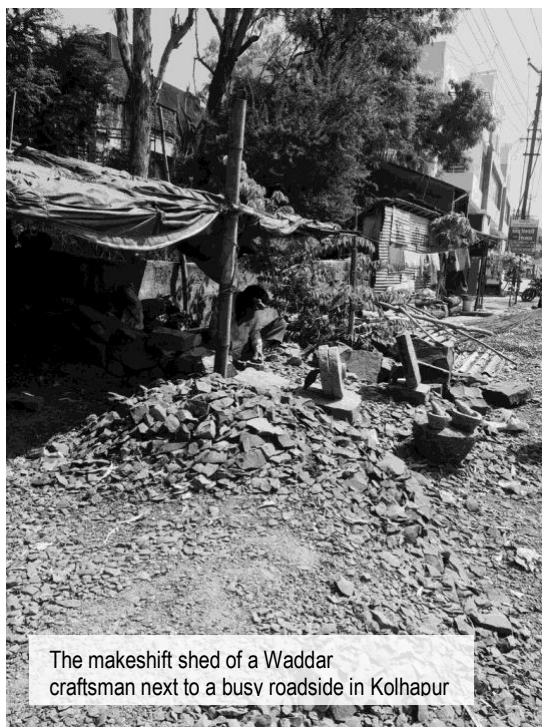
The Waddar *samaj's* exquisite poetry in stone

By Aparna Maladkar (2018)

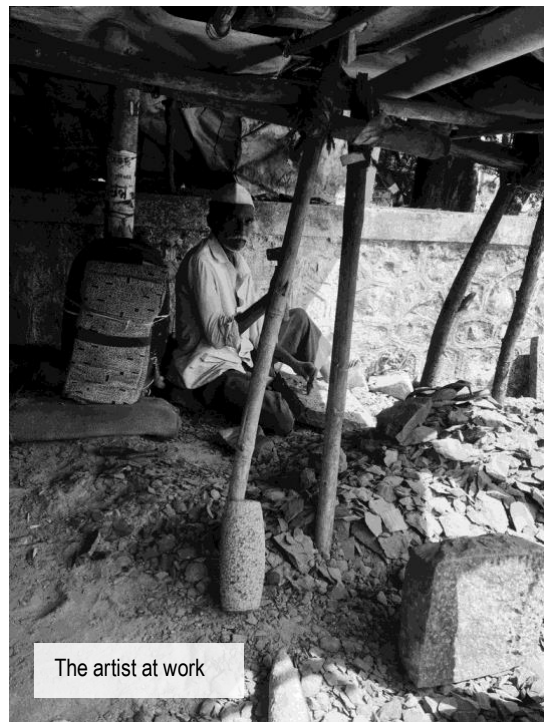
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The Waddars are one of the many nomadic tribes of India, and are listed as one of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India. Scattered throughout south west India, they are known for their hard work in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, especially traditional labour activities such as stone cutting and engraving, building work, earth digging.

One of the Waddar sub-groups in my home town, Kolhapur is the Dagdiwaddars or Kalluwaddars (literally stone Waddars), who traditionally work in stone quarries and with stone craft. They are considered to have an immaculate knowledge of stones, and their work includes construction and stone sculpturing.¹ On the busy streets of Kolhapur, some Dagdiwaddars *samaj* (society) groups work as stone carvers. Many such artisans can be seen working ceaselessly all day long alongside one of the busy and hot roadsides leading to the Shivaji University.



The makeshift shed of a Waddar craftsman next to a busy roadside in Kolhapur

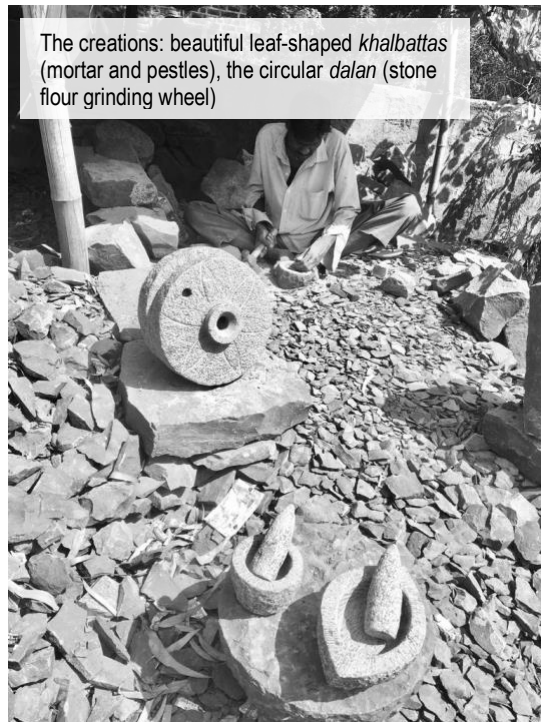


The artist at work

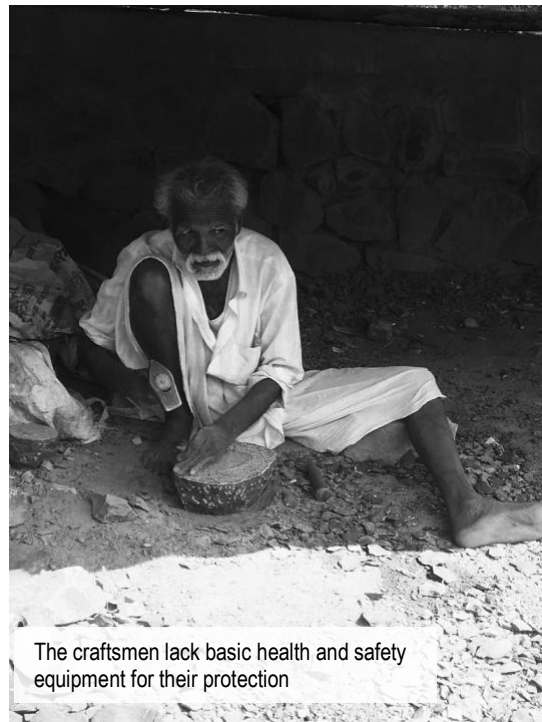
Their creations are the age-old essential implements in the traditional Indian kitchen: the *khalbatta* (mortar and pestle), *dalan* (stone flour grinding wheel) and *pata varwanta* (grinding stone), that are sculpted to create a beautiful poetry in stone. The artists build tiny, basic and open makeshift work-sheds along the road, often from cheap materials such as wood and tarpaulin, and are engrossed in chiselling kitchen

¹ Kulkarni, V., 2018. Memory Stones of the Wadar Tribe in Maharashtra. International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities and Social Science, [online] 01(10), pp.120-125. Available at: <<http://www.ijlrhss.com/paper/volume-1-issue-10/15-HSS-243.pdf>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

sculptures as they turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the heavy traffic enveloping them, as so do the people on the road forget about them.



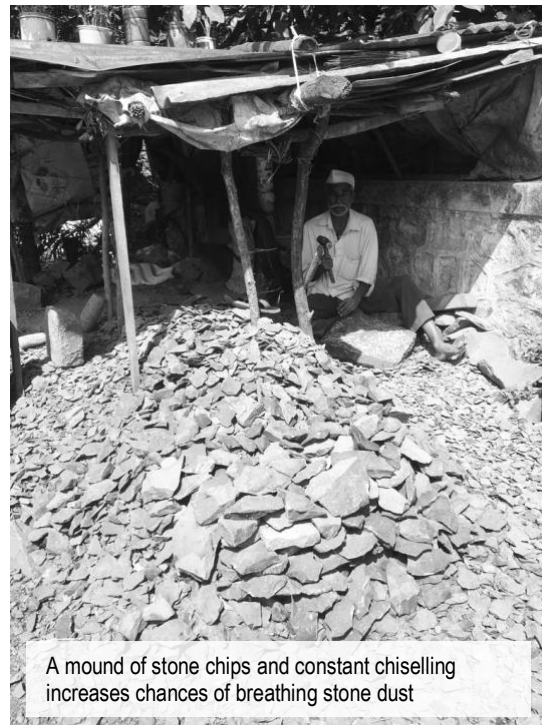
The creations: beautiful leaf-shaped *khalbattas* (mortar and pestles), the circular *dalan* (stone flour grinding wheel)



The craftsmen lack basic health and safety equipment for their protection



The busy main road with hazardous air and noise pollution from continuous traffic



A mound of stone chips and constant chiselling increases chances of breathing stone dust

The finished surfaces of the beautiful leaf-shaped *khalbatta*, the circular *dalan* and the flat rectangular *pata varwanta* are punctured with little dimples all over for better grinding stability, power and quality, and then simple designs carved over it. The artists use few humble carving chisels, a hammer and some water to create these heavy, bulky and exquisitely detailed apparatuses. They often work in very extreme

weather conditions with little protection from the hot summers or heavy humid monsoons. The work itself is extremely laborious and to add to that, the artists are continuously breathing in stone dust and extremely hazardous traffic fumes. The workers have no gear other than a cloth wrapped around their heads to protect them from the harsh local air and noise pollution, and refuse waste littering next to them. Often extremely poor, they have limited resources or information about buying appropriate health and safety equipment that can protect them from pollution, injuries from stone chips and carving implements, and roadside rubbish. The makeshift hut, which is their work place and shop, provides little protection.



The beautiful *khalbattas* and flat rectangular *pata varwanta* (grinding stone), an integral part of the Indian kitchen

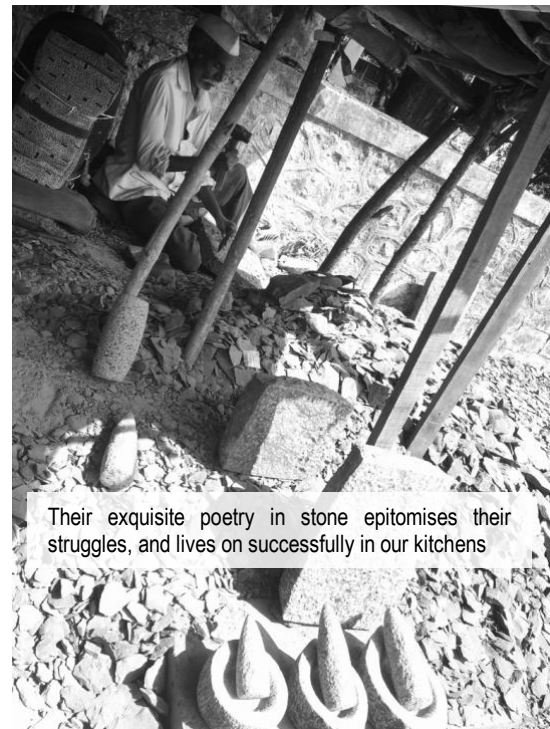


These tools are often like heirlooms passed through generations

Stone *khalbatta*, *dalan* and *pata varwanta* can be chiselled out of *kaalla patthar* (black stone), marble or granite, and have been in use in India since ancient times for medicinal and culinary purposes. Though not as frequently used nowadays, these are still an integral part of the Indian kitchen. As kids, I remember sitting on haunches in the kitchen, waiting a turn to grind the *masala vaatan* or *goli* (mixed ingredients ground to a paste ball) on the *pata varwanta*. As the ingredients crushed against the stones to become one huge mash, the heady fragrant aromas of some like coconut, chillies, coriander, curry leaves and basil was enough to get our taste buds salivating. As the stones ground against each other, the scraping sound became music to our ears and a sure sign that there was a culinary feast in the house that day. Grinding food elements to paste is extremely hard work, and the cooks who use it daily, develop strong biceps, shoulder and back muscles from the regular workout.

Khalbattas, which can take hours to create, typically cost about INR 200 to INR 400 (GBP 2.10-GBP 4.20) each. Life is extremely tough, and a craftsman, on a good day,

may earn around INR 1,000 (GBP 10.50) or sometimes nothing.² Many houses in India have these kitchen implements for traditional grinding of *masala* (spices) in spite of the modern technology widely taking over the Indian kitchen. This is because hand pounding can essentially bring out maximum flavour, which an electronic food processor probably isn't able to do. These tools are often like heirlooms passed through generations that bring back fragrant childhood memories and aromas of grandmother's delicious cooking.



The Waddar *samaj* is often marginalised and exploited group of people, and very little thought is given to their socio-economic status and the implements that they design and create. In spite of its reverence in Indian families, the artists who create these valuable cooking instruments, are often 'invisible' to people due to their social status, until they are in need of their beautiful craftsmanship. Their exquisite poetry in stone epitomises the struggles of the Wadar *samaj* as it thrives successfully in our kitchens.

² Aakanksha, A., 2019. *Balappa Dhotre's Craft Is Carved In Stone*. [online] People's Archive of Rural India. Available at: <<https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/balappa-dhotres-craft-is-carved-in-stone/>> [Accessed 5 June 2020].