The southern districts of Gujarat as well as the northern and north-western districts of Maharashtra are largely populated by several tribal communities. The Bhil, Konkna, Gamit, Warli, Dhodiya, Dubla, and Chaudhri are among some of them. The Konkna or Kunna is one of the prominent tribal communities of this region. Konknas are mainly agriculturists producing foodgrain of all kinds. Some say that they migrated to these parts from the coastal area of Maharashtra known as Konkan, while others argue that they have always been native to this land, and that this land itself was included under the term ‘Konkan’. In any case, the Konknas have lived in this mountainous region for several centuries, have been very closely associated with land and farming, of both the shifting and steady variety, and have come to be recognised in the area by the term ‘The Farmer’ or Kunbi.

The Konknas take great pride in the name ‘Kunbi’ which means producer of grain. When the crop is harvested and brought to the granaries, the Bhagat is invited to means producer of grain. When the crop is harvested and brought to the granaries, the Bhagat is invited to sing the narrative of Kansari and brought to the granaries, the Bhagat is invited to sing the narrative of Kansari and bring the harvest into reality. It is a ritual performance, one is a ritual narrative sung by the Bhagat, Shri Goval of the Panch Mahal of Dholi. The narrative is sung on the traditional instrument of the Bhagat, the ghungli, and is accompanied by the accompaniment of instruments like thali or ghungli. The narrative varies from place to place and from singer to singer in its plot, characters, and style. However, the focus of the narrative remains on the importance of foodgrain and the power of Kansari - the goddess of foodgrain - against those who would merely consume and misuse it. These long narratives, often sung through the night, are not songs of propitiation to the goddess Kansari. Rather, they present Kansari as a human figure, as a protagonist.

Apart from these long narratives sung by the Bhagat, there are also several shorter versions of the story of Kansari, some of them versions for young children. But in none of these versions is the story seen as mere entertainment; it is always seen as a narrative having religious sanctity and imbuing the central cultural values of the community. Religion, here, is viewed not as a sect of worship, but as the central principle or value upon which a community builds itself.

The faith in Kansari can be seen among the cultivator tribes throughout the tribal belt from North and Northwest Maharashtra, from the Dhule, Khandesh and Nasik areas up to central Gujarat, including Baroda district and further. The concept of Kansari in the psyche of the communities is somewhat complex – the pod of foodgrain is Kansari, the grain itself is Kansari, the plant, the deity - symbol for foodgrain, the divine as well as human character found in the stories - all bear the name Kansari. And when one asks what does Kansari stand for, the Bhagat replies - “This is foodgrain, this is prosperity, this is our God.” ... “This is everything, this is the only thing”... “For us, there is no greater god, the harvested foodgrain itself is the highest God.” Thus, one can certainly say that Kansari is a matter of faith for the food-cultivating tribal peasants of the region. However, as one starts looking at the several versions of the story, one wonders if it speaks merely of faith or suggests something more.

It will be interesting to look at some of the motifs that emerge from a number of versions of the story of Kansari. But before we do that, let us have a brief account of the longest version so far published. This one is a ritual narrative sung by the Bhagat, Shri Manubhai Bachalbhai Vadhu of Toranvera village of south Gujarat, documented and presented by Shri Dahyabhai Vadhu, a Konkna himself. (Vadhu, Dahyabhi, ed., 2000. Kunkna Kathao, Sahitya Akademi).

The story begins with the genesis; the end of the world and a new beginning. Gods, who are judges of human beings’ behaviour, bring about the catastrophe, and out of the seeds of all living beings, including humans, stored carefully by the gods, the new life begins. Humans once again grow in number, and in this society of humans, ‘a king is made’. The daughter of this king marries Kartukidev, a god, and gives birth to Kansari. The toddler Kansari is able to produce foodgrain from pebbles and turn water into milk. But ‘the black-headed human being is not supposed to have such potential in her’, therefore, the envious gods kidnap the child. She is found and brought back only when she comes of age. The young damsel Kansari falls in love with a shepherd (cowherd) boy, singing beautiful music on his flute called the Tambemahovar. In the Swayamvara she declines all the gods and kings congregated there and offers the Varnala to this Goval. The angry gods conspire and one day kill Kansari’s consort - the shepherd. To avenge this and to seek justice, Kansari appeals to all the natural phenomena – the clouds, the thunder, the winds - and withholds all food and water on earth. The whole world is now in misery and people start despising the vicious gods who...
are primarily responsible for the calamity. At last, the gods apologise and appeal to Kansari to save the world. Kansari brings the food and water back into the world, then brings her consort back to life, blesses her ardent follower, the Kunbi, and at last takes her place of reverence in the conglomeration of the gods - the Devasabha.

Although other versions of the Kansari story differ from this version almost in every literary respect, there are some common patterns of structure, behaviour and statement implicit in them are shared by all the versions.

The first and foremost thing that one notices in these stories is a kind of social hierarchy implied there. Among the characters depicted, several are ‘gods’. They have a community of their own. There are also some ‘kings’. As against these powerful entities, there are the ‘men’, the ‘Dubla Kunbis’ (meaning poor farmers, also specific community names). The focal point of the story is always the equation and tension between these two groups. Apart from the gods, there is also a Bhagwan who seems to be a higher god with wider powers and who is beyond the tension between the two.

Among the gods there is a ‘Mahadev’. He is powerful among the gods, commands their community and he is the ‘lord’ for the ‘people’ in the respective story. He is the chief of ‘Dwaraka’ city, which is the seat of power of the gods. One can see a certain acceptance of his place of power at the primary level; yet, when he, along with his associates turns atrociously against the people out of jealousy or greed, there is revolt against him by the protagonist, either Kansari herself in a human form or the Kunbi, the cultivator of foodgrain, or sometimes Kansari herself as the cultivator. It may be a mild fight only to cleverly escape the atrocity or exploitation, or may take the form of a clearly spelt out, explicit war involving the phenomena and affecting the entire humanity.

The protagonist is supported in this fight by natural elements such as clouds, wind, thunderstorm, and the animals and birds befriended by him. They are peers of the protagonist, not slaves or servants to his command. With the help of these friends from the natural world, the cultivator protagonist defies the powerful lords and establishes his supremacy in cultivation and his unchallengeable relationship with foodgrain, with the goddess Kansari promising the Kunbi, “I will always stay with you. I will give you prosperity. Toil in the soil; hold always a stick in your hand. Feed the hungry. I’ll be with you.”

There is another interesting character-motif in the stories. There is Yehu Mawli – Mother Yehu — who commands all the seeds of foodgrain. In case of want of seeds, the Kunbi can assuredly go to Yehu and ask for seeds (on return basis). Yehu certainly is not a member of the Devsabha, yet she commands recognition among the gods; the Kunbis revere her and depend on her. In one of the stories, Yehu is depicted as an old woman (doshi), with eyes as big as the wheel of a cart, one requiring space of twelve bullocks for her seat and one calling with a robust shout. In another story, Yehu is an ascetic maid, who conceives by ‘consuming the bread half consumed by Mahadev.’ Kansari is born. Later, she finds out the whereabouts of the irresponsible father from Yehu and manifests her powers to him.

Kansari, as a character in the stories, is often depicted as a young girl. The girl has superhuman qualities suggesting or leading to prosperity, yet she herself denies all pleasures and comforts and prefers to live a commoner’s life, toiling in the soil. Kansari is an independent mind, nobody can own or command her. She lives where she wants to live, does what she wants to do; she values and maintains her dignity and independence. In several stories, she comes to the Kunbi’s house as a diseased and dirty creature and tests his character. While all others despise her, Kunbi is kind to her and offers her regular shelter and bread to be shared with him. Kansari is pleased with this nobility and blesses him with prosperity. But when this prosperity leads to indignant treatment to her, she immediately leaves him; all his prosperity vanishes and in repentance, he yields to her.

As one looks at a number of these stories together, there arise several questions in one’s mind. First of all, should these stories be grouped together as a whole or should they be treated as separate tales? All the stories are referred to by the community members as ‘the tale of Kansari’, yet there is so much variation in every aspect that it is hard to relate any particular version to another, sometimes even the character of Kansari herself being a somewhat
secondary or peripheral one. Then what is it that holds these tales together so decisively in the collective mind of the people? As said earlier, in spite of all the variation of story-line or plot, character, length, style, presentation as well as intended audience and effect, each of the stories, even as a stand-alone, definitely carries a statement in it - a statement of the seemingly weak fighting their way against the powerful for justice and rights, for values they cherish. And it must be this implicit statement that binds these separate tales together for the community.

This leads us to further questions: What could be the significance of this statement for these people? What meaning does this statement carry with it? What exactly do these tales want to say? Who is this Mahadev? And what conflict do these tales speak of?

To think on these problems, one has to look at the history of this region, the region on the borders of today’s Gujarat and Maharashtra states. For centuries, this fertile region has been ruled by one or another ruler from outside. The Islamic sultanate, the Maratha rulers and the British, all have governed this region, of course through the local representative of the commanding power. And, throughout this period, the tiller tribes who settled in these jungles known for its teak trees transformed the difficult region, through their toil, into a fertile land. While the tiller, keeping his needs to the minimum, has cherished the thick of the jungle, the flora and fauna, the waters and mountains that have actually entered his pantheon, the ruler’s concern has been the revenue, from field and from forest. Though we do not have much account of the common man’s position from the earlier period, in the later period, there have been peasant uprisings and resistance movements in the tribal communities of this region. In The Coming of the Devi, David Hardiman has given a very interesting account of how the notion of resistance to the ruling class as well as the trading class got built up in the tribal population and found its expression in a seemingly religious movement of the date.

Then, should we say that the tales we are looking at could be a memoir of a conflict woven with mythology? Is it remembrance by an exploited, marginalised, and muted society of a voice raised against exploitation, perhaps with some little success? The notion of defiance of the powerful may, perhaps, be a reflection of reality to some extent, or may be purely ‘wishful thinking’ of a mutated milieu.

What one gathers from this literature, oral though, is that it must have been a conflict not merely on economic grounds, but also of a value system. Through the defiance and humiliation of the exploitative, atrocious, and powerful, and through the simultaneous despising of personal pride and impudence, do these tales not seem to cherish and present a community’s value system as ‘sacrosanct’ for its posterity? At one level, they take the form of a morality tale celebrating specific values and shaping up the collective mind. At the same time, in the event of the values being challenged, they also suggest a possibility of standing up to face the challenge, lest the values be compromised with.

It would not be possible, nor would it be justified, to try to find a one-to-one relationship between historical happenings and the depiction in the stories. All one may say is that in these stories, one may catch a reflection of a prolonged conflict between a land-based people and the powers that governed them through the course of history. Whether it is the reflection of a specific fight against a specific ruler of a specific time, or, if by making ‘Mahadev’ a prototype for the ruler, it is an effort to keep the conflict over the value system alive in the collective conscience, it is hard to say. Yet, with their potential to weave together history with the values or religion of a people, and to carry the fabric for future generations, these tales certainly demand a far more serious investigation and understanding.