

THE ETHNIC ORIGIN OF KONKANASTHA BRAHMINS: FACTS, MYTHS AND CONTROVERSIES

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KEYWORDS :

The "Konkanastha Brahmins" also called the "Chitpavan Brahmins" are a Brahmin community of the Konkan region of the Indian State of Maharashtra. The community had historically been very important to local Maharashtrian politics, and Indian politics as a whole, as it provided the *Peshwas*, i.e. the Prime ministers of the Maratha Empire that was the most dominant state in the subcontinent in the pre-colonial period and had come to rule most of the region. (1)

Unheard of before 1700, the Chitpavan Brahmins of Maharashtra came to dominate the fields of social reform, law, scholarship, government service and the arts by the nineteenth century. Their two names, Konkanastha and Chitpavan, suggest their origins. The first name "Konkanastha" indicates the rocky, unyielding land in the Ratnagiri district of the Konkan, which they have traditionally farmed. Thus all Konkanasthas can trace their history as far as the Konkan. (2)

The name, "Chitpavan", would seem to have come from the Konkan town of "Chitpol". When you spot a Maharashtrian with blue or green eyes, 1 : 10 he is a Chitpavan. And his fair colour suggests a foreign origin. A history of the Bene-Israelis, who settled in the Kolaba district of the Konkan, claims the Chitpavans as fellow Jews who became separated from their shipmates. Further accounts have guessed at a homeland anywhere from Iran to just north of Sholapur. (2)

Few historians and anthropologists are of the view that the Chitpavans came to India from Egypt, while others say they came from Greece. A typical Chitpavan has usually a fair complexion, has a sharp nose and steel-grey eyes. He can be thus also be called handsome. Chitpavan girls possess good physical features but tend to look pale. (2)

There are multiple theories about the **etymology** of the word "Chitpavan": The word means pure from pyre" and is derived from the Sanskrit words Chita ("pyre") and Pavan ("pure").

The word means "pure-hearted" and is derived from the Sanskrit words Chitta ("heart") and Pavan ("pure")



Figure 1: Geographical location of the Konkan Districts in India

The first written reference mentioning the community name as Chitpavan Brahmin was found in the statement 4 of a Brahmin named Raghunāth from Kānsi city (currently known as Vārānasi) in his book on astrology titled "Muhurtmālā" written in October 1661. He stated that he was a "Shāndilya Gotri" Chitpavan Brāhmin from Pālshet in Konkan and his grand

father Nrusimha, a well known astrologer, was conferred the title of "Jyotirvitsaras" by the Moghul Emperor Akbar in 1599 A.D. The Brahmin Raghunāth must have learnt his caste name Chitpavan from his grandfather Nrusimha who had migrated to Kashi from Konkan. Nrusimha also must have learnt it from his father. Therefore the name "Chitpavan" must have been used as back as 1570. (3)

The reference in a letter dated 19th Feb 1677 written by a clerk in service of King Shivaji Maharaj. The letter mentioned that "Deshstha, Karhāde and Chitpavan brāhmins lived in Kokan area and were honored on for their merit". After 1700 A.D. many documents one can find were the word Chitpavan is used. The first document mentioning Chitpavan surnames Ganapule, Rānade and Parānjape was dated 1600 A.D.

Until 1700 A.D. Chitpavans were practically unknown to the world outside. Around 1690 one Chitpavan named Balaji Bhat left Konkan and went to Pune city in search of a job. Being hard working and intelligent person and so inspite of starting as a clerk he rose to the post of Peshawa ('Foremost' in Persian) in 1713. (3)

In another reference, the author began the study by offering a brief history of the land "Konkan". The western coast was well known for its trading and commercial relations and was dominated by Hindu dynasties, by Mohammedian, Portuguese, Maratha and finally by British rule. (4)

The "Parashurama" myth is widely accepted in Maharashtra for explaining the origin of the Chitpavans. In the chapter the author, therefore has traced the myth through its different stages of development. The popular version of the myth recognizes the fact that the Konkan was a "Gift of the sea", a fact verified by geologists.

In the myth, Lord Parashurama was everywhere the hero, and the father of the people. The next point in the myth was the story of creation of fourteen (14 Brahmins) from the corpses of the dead resulting from the shipwreck. Accordingly, interpreters point to Persia, Africa and other distant areas as the place of origin of the Chitpavans. But the most that can be inferred from the myth is that the Chitpavans were "immigrants".

The "Puranic version" of the myth states that Parashurama, after settling in the new land, invited Brahmins from other parts of the country to assist him in his sacrifices. Since they refused, Lord Parashurama resolved to create new Brahmins, and, decrying some people crossing the beach, he found that they were fisherman with sixty (60) families in their caste. He made them all into Brahmins, and because the initiation took place in the cremation ground they were called Chitpavans. There is however no suggestion of an immigration.

The first attempt at tracing the origin of the Chitpavans was the reference of R.S. Mandlik who maintained that the ancestors of the people must have come from the sea in a ship, possibly from Eastern sea-board of south Africa and were probably "Berbers". They were then assimilated into the Dravida Brahmins. Sir R.G. Bandarkar also thought that the

Chitpavans were Nordics confirming Mandlik's view, but asserting that they came from "Palestine". (4)

Mr. VK Rajwade based his interpretation on the Parashurama shaka (era) and maintained that Parashurama means Rema belonged to the country of the "Parsus" of Parsis. He also connected the name Parashurama with the Bhrgus, and the Bhrgus with the Phrygians or Persians. Mr. VK Rajwade also has affirmed that the colonisation of the Konkan by Parashurama and his followers took place after the battle of the Mahabharata

Mr VK Rajwade also had tried to show that many of the surnames of the Chitpavans are in reality the names of ancient Rishis prevalent as Gotras before Bauddhayana thus concluding that the Chitpavans had come to the Konkan long before Bauddhayana. (4)

The next interpreter was Mr.Sane. He criticized Mr. VK Rajwade in some directions and had stated that the Chitpavans came originally from "Cutch" or "Kathiawar" as their language show points of similarity with the Cutchi language. The author devoted the chapter to see how far and in what degree Lord Parashurama was connected with the rest of the Western coast. Gujarat, the northern part of this coastal strip, was linked with the name of "Bhrgu" and not with that of Parashurama. In Kerala, to the south, Parashurama occurred in frequent association with persons, populations and occurrences. There is a tradition in these parts of Brahmins being brought from north India. From a survey of this material the author had concluded that the Chitpavans and not the other Brahmin groups were most closely connected with the Parashurama myth.

The working hypothesis which emerges from the myth was that Parashurama with a few others plotted to kill the "Haihaya princes". From their home on the Ganges these heroes travelled all the way to the Narmada where the Haihaya princes was killed; but the party had to flee in haste and went to the lonely western coast either via Nasik or by sea-route via Prabhasa. In the perilous journey, all save a handful were killed. Parashurama brought women from the south and got them married to his followers. It were these political refugees who were the forefathers of the Chitpavans.

Turning to the question of the period when Parashurama lived, the author examines the evidence and concludes that he must have lived somewhere between 2000 and 2500 B.C

The Chitpavan Brahmins have two sub-groups: the Rigvedi Konkanastha and the Yajurvedi Konkanastha. They belong to the Smarth Sect. The community comprises fourteen (14) "Gotras" (clans) which as one of the regulators of marriage are linked with sains and sages. The Gotras are Atri, Kapi, Kashyap, Koundinya, Gargya, Kaushik, Jamadagni, Nityundana, Bhargava, Bharadwaj, Vatsya, Vashistha, Vishnuvruddha and Shandilya.

All the fourteen (14) Gotras are clustered into seven (7) groups which are known as the "Gana". A gotra belonging to a particular gana cannot be considered for marriage with another gotra of same gana. The gana are as follows:- Atri-Kapi, Gargya-Bhardwaj, Koundiya-Vashistha, Kashyap-Shandilya, Kaushik-Bhargava, amadagni-Vatsa, Nityundana-Vishnuvruddha. Chitpavans also revere deities connected with gotras known as the "Devakas" and each family worships it's respective Devaka at the time of marriage, while individuals with the same devaka can marry. There are four hundred and forty (440) surnames amongst Konkanastha Brahmins.

The Chitpavans of today thus seem to be a mixture of the

northern Indo-Aryans and the southern Dravidians. And Rajwade's interpretation of the name Chitpavan seems most plausible. The Bhrgus were noted as fire-priests and one way of arranging the fire was the construction of chiti, bricks laid out in a certain way to contain the sacred fire. The Brahmins led by Parashurama probably arranged their fire in this way, and therefore, blessed by Chityagni and hence got the name Chityapavan, later corrupted to Chitpavan. (4)

https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/19935/IN (5)

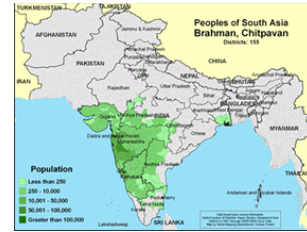


Figure 2: Peoples of South Asia, Brahman Chitpavan, Districts 155

Photo Source	Anonymous
Map Source	Joshua Project / Global Mapping International
Profile Source	David Kugel → Reference number (5)
Data Sources	Data is compiled from various sources. Read more
* Religion Values	From latest India census data. Current values may differ.

In the book, Shri/ Mr. Lele has made several original points not generally known to everybody. Thus for example, the Kula Devata of Chitale family is Vindhya Vasini in Uttar Pradesh, and not some temple in Konkan. (6)

In other reference it's stated that for to this day the true Chitpavan perserves their fair skin, the strange grey eyes, the aspect of refined strength and intelligence, which might had characterized the shipwrecked mariners of old fable and marked them out in later years as strangers in a strange land. But once came they, these foreign immigrants, who after long sojourn in the country of their adoption moved upwards to the Deccan and stood within the shadow of the Peshwa's throne ? (7).

The lesson to be learned from their home dialect and from their strange surnames,--Gogte, Lele, Karve, Gadre, Hingne and so on,--was that the Chitpavan Brahmins of Western India came in legendary ages from Gedrosia, Kirman and the Makran coast, and that prior to their domicile in those latitudes they probably formed part of the population of ancient Egypt or Africa (7)

40 years ago Rao Saheb V. N. Mandlik remarked that "the ancestors of the tribe probably came by ships either from some other port in India or from the opposite coast of Africa;" and in these later days his theory is corroborated by General Haig, who traces them back to the great marts on the Indus and thence still further back to the Persian Gulf and Egypt. Why or at what date they left the famous country of the Pharaohs, none can say: but that these white-skinned Brahmins are descendants of such people as the Berbers, who belonged of right to the European races, seems the most plausible theory of their origin yet put forward, and serves as an additional proof of the enormous influence exercised upon posterity by the famous country of the Nile. (7)

In a study regards genomic analyses, the Chitpavan brahmin demonstrated younger maternal component and substantial paternal gene flow from West Asia, thus giving credence to

their recent Irano-Scythian ancestry from Mediterranean or Turkey, which correlated well with European-looking features of this caste. This also explained their untraceable ethno-history before 1000 years, brahminization event and later amalgamation by Maratha. (8)

The contributors to the study observed 15% similar HVS -1 sequence motif (M4 lineage) between Chitpavan-brahmin and Bene-Israeli (or Indian Jews), probably suggesting similar indigenous Paleolithic contribution.(8). The non-recombining uniparental contributions in Chitpavan-brahmin Mediterranean or East European type as shown by 20% (HV, U3) mtDNA lineages and highly frequent (R1a and L) Y-haplogroups.

Table 2. Distribution of Y-haplogroups in caste populations of Western India.

Y-haplogroup	Deceath-brahmin	Chitpavan-brahmin	Maratha	Changar	Average Frequency
T1	0.158	0.137	0.319	0.284	0.226
R1a1	0.268	0.045	0.011	0.235	0.215
R2	0.105	0.106	0.053	0.284	0.140
R1a	0.053	0.318	0.053	0	0.136
L	0.105	0.168	0.105	0.059	0.109
J2	0.105	0.121	0.21	0.059	0.134
C	0.053	0.03	0.053	0.059	0.046
K2	0.053	0.03	0	0	0.021
F*	0	0.03	0	0	0.008
F	0	0.015	0	0	0.004
Haplogroup diversity (SD)	0.842 (0.066)	0.834 (0.026)	0.836 (0.052)	0.809 (0.055)	

Photo 1 Distribution of Y-haplogroups in caste populations of Western India.

The admixture and PC analyses (Figure 1) reflected genetic association of Chitpavan-brahmin with Iranian, Ashkenazi-Jews (Turkey), Greeks (East Europe) and to some extent with Central Asian Turkish populations elucidating their distinct Nordic, "Scytho-Iranian" ancestry. The Caucasian link of Chitpavan-brahmin has also been inferred from biparental microsatellites variations (Photo 2). (8)

Table 7. Admixture estimates based on bi- and uni-parental genetic markers in caste populations of western India.

	% contribution (in SD) from putative parental populations*			
	Central Asian	West Asian	European	extant Maharashtra castes
	No-69	No-305	No-113	No-55-130
Chitpavan-brahmin:				
Y-SNP	1	0.125	6.878	0.506
mt DNA	-0.081	-0.064	0.084 (0.3)	1.062 (0.18)
autosomal STR	-0.0144	-0.04	6.289 (0.86)	0.39 (0.041)
Deceath-brahmin:				
Y-SNP	0.218	0.062	0.25	0.56
mt DNA	0.009 (0.75)	0.138 (0.52)	-0.155	0.972 (0)
autosomal STR	-0.003	0.010 (0.027)	0.212 (0.020)	0.78 (0.04)
Marathi:				
Y-SNP	0.273 (2.7)	6.285	0.212	0.28 (0.5)

Photo 2 Admixture estimates based on Bi and Uni-parental genetic markers in caste populations of Western India.

The observed genomic analyses in the study asserted the ethnographical fact that Chitpavan-brahmin share ancestry with conspicuously European-looking Pagan or Alpine group, who under religious pressure had migrated from Anatolian Turkey or East Europe to Gujarat coast probably via sea-vessel. Besides their documented history is untraceable beyond 1000 years, further indicating that they were not part of the original Vedic migrations (early Indo-European) on the west coast.(8)

Chitpavans are Bene Israeli Jews: In 2001 Dr. Mini Kariappa Asst. Professor/ Professor of Anatomy & Genetics at the Jubilee Mission Medical College of Thrissur and Kolenchery College of Medicine started her herculean task to diagnose hundreds of blood samples for DNA mapping at the Hyderabad Center. When she shared her findings with Prof George Menacherry in 2005 he included a sentence about her finding in his presentation at the Church History Association of India. Dr. Kariappa's research found that Chitpavan Brahmins , Tulu Brahmins, The Namboothiri Brahmins and the Naramis or Syrian Christians all have the same DNA factors (common

Haplotypes) those of the Jews. (9)

Some genetic studies by Dr. Oak had given an opinion that the Chitpavans are related to the Parsis of Gujarat state. A few similarities in fire worship have been pointed out. Another author has stated that the Chipavans might be a hybrid race of the Parsis, the Jews, the Kashmiri Pandits and the Egyptian Berbers. (10)

The controversial reference states that the Portuguese girls marrying Hindu Brahmins is foolish as Brahmins of that age would never have accepted such a thing. And most importantly, of the 14 Gotras of Chitpavans, a few are not found in the Gotras of other Marathi Brahmins although they are found in other Brahmin communities of India. The strange thing is that, the 14 Gotras do not perfectly match as a subset of any other Brahmin communities in India, hence the theory of mixing).(11)

In an observation based on the uni-parental markers from fathers high R1a+L suggest at most they came from Pakistan/ Balochistan. These two are common in India/Pakistan and less frequent in other countries in that part of the sea shore. (Kerala -Pak- Arabia-Egypt-Africa-Portugese-Spain). Very few Jewish related markers so it is also not true. (12)

Based on overall genetic profile they were found close to West Asia / East Europe/ Ashkanazi Jewish so is most of North Indians/Pakistanis. So it is not new. But they have more female haplo groups to influence this in their particular caste group ratio wise. So it may be true that they were immigrants who lost in sea. But the men might have got sicker while fighting the rough sea and woman survived. Or the men are so few and when they merged to Brahmin community the local people with more numbers became majority part of the group. (12)

As per another opinion, the Chitpavans were descendants of a mixed race formed during the early Portuguese conquest when they sought diplomacy through marriage by offering the daughters of the king - Orfas del Rei - to some powerful Deshastha and Karhada landowning families in the Konkan. The Orfas del Rei, were orphans from Catholic families in Europe and middle east, whose fathers had died in war etc. The Portuguese regularly sent ships of such girls to faraway lands as wives for their expats and also local rulers. Because of this, the Chitpavans got the Gotra of their fathers, however they were still not considered as full Brahmins untill about 6 generations. It was only after the succesful completion of the Gramanyaas in Satara in the late 1800s that the Chitpawan got a full Brahmin status. The Portuguese ploy did not work, because of a strong Hindutva sentiment in those days under Shivaji and his first Peshvas the Pingle and Kulkarni families. The fourth Peshwa was actually a Chitpawan. (13)

There are a few theories on the origin of the konkanstha brahmins, none of them are completely accurarate. Therefore, the present genome analyses conducted provides conclusive evidence of their recent migration, genesis, and expansion after they migrated from "Sopara" (India's western trade zone) to the geographically isolated Konkan-region, where they adopted Konkani language and cultivated cash crop. The 15% similar HVS -1 sequence motif (M4 lineage) is observed between Chitpavan-brahmin and Bene-Israeli (or Indian Jews).(14).

So as per the observations they could be greek decendants but chances of them being bene israeli's is more. Either ways all research done till date show that they migrated from the Mediterranean or East European region to India.

Although today, Chitpavan or Kokanastha Brahmin community members are found all over the world, they num

ber only around 500000 and about 10000 to 15000 outside India. Less than 300 years ago, this community was strictly isolated in a small area around Chiplun in Konkan in Maharashtra. Because of this genetic isolation, members of this community share several similar characteristics or a "genetic" bond. (15)

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