

Satara's Hanging Banyan Tree फांशीचा वड



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Arvind Kolhatkar spent his childhood in Satara, and later studied at Fergusson College, Pune and the University of Pune. After getting his MA in Mathematics, he joined the Indian Revenue Service, served in the Income Tax Department for about 30 years, rose to the rank of Commissioner, and retired voluntarily. He was an Executive Director of the Bombay Stock Exchange for 3 years. He and his wife Aruna currently live in Toronto.

Until the 1960s, our home at 77 Shukrawar Peth was at the northern end of Satara, Maharashtra. Beyond it, there was a large barren grassy wilderness called *Genda Mal*, so named after the rhinoceros kept there in Chhatrapati Shahu's menagerie. Our family members would occasionally go there for a morning run or evening walk. A lonely one-branch old Banyan tree standing there had a story behind it.

In 1857 there was a small uprising against the British rule at Satara. The British easily suppressed it and apprehended several persons, including Sitaram Gupte, Narayan Pavaskar, Keshav Chitre, Shivaram Bahushrut, and Vitthal Kondi. Sitaram and others were tried and sentenced to death. They were blown from a canon, shot, or hanged, depending on the severity of their actions. The executions took place near the Banyan tree and some persons were hanged from its branches. After that, the tree was known as फांशीचा वड (*Phansi cha Vad*) or the 'Hanging Banyan' tree.

The tree was already more than 100 years old when I saw it as a child. I do not remember how I knew that it was the 'Hanging Banyan' tree. This was local knowledge and I must have picked it up. What must have earlier been a big tree was now reduced to just the trunk and a large branch.

When the centenary of the events of 1857 was observed in 1957, a Memorial to those patriots was erected under the tree. It was a small stone column mounted on a platform inside a barbed wire fence. All boys and girls studying in schools in Satara were taken to attend the ceremony on the spot to mark the occasion. I was among them. As I recollect, the then District Judge of Satara was the Chief Guest and a prominent advocate of Satara was the organizer of the event – both names escape me now.

However, I do remember a *faux pas* committed by the advocate while introducing the learned Judge. I found it so amusing that I have never forgotten it. The advocate was introducing the Judge to the audience in superlatives. In praising the Judge's oratorical skills, the advocate said, "The Judge is such an accomplished public speaker that it is difficult to believe that he stammers in private conversations!" I am sure the advocate was endeavouring to pay a real compliment to the Judge, not a left-handed one!

The *Encyclopaedia of Political Parties* by O.P.Ralhan mentions the Hanging Banyan. <http://tinyurl.com/9toazu>. It describes a visit by L.K.Advani to Satara during his Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra of May-July 1997. After visiting the Hanging Banyan, Mr. Advani said, "Usually people go on a

religious pilgrimage for self-purifying spiritual experience. For me ... however, a visit to Lokmanya Tilak's birthplace in Pune or to *Phansi cha Vad* this morning has provided the same experience.”

Some time thereafter, the Hanging Banyan at last succumbed to a summer storm. No doubt, its remains were cut into chips and carried away by the locals as firewood. The area where it stood itself has changed dramatically. What was once a barren piece of land far outside the town is now full of new homes. Perhaps none of those who live there knows what lies under their feet.

I doubt whether the small pillar placed there in 1957 has survived these changes. It was somewhat shoddily built and must have withered away over the last fifty years. The very identity of the spot is lost.

The memory and knowledge of the Hanging Banyan now remains only in books and the minds of those who saw it and knew about it.

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