

When Bandra's Kolis danced in the Republic Day parade (and what that has to do with a Bollywood hit)

Over the decades, one traditional Mumbai fishermen's song has left its mark on Nehru, Aamir Khan's 'Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin' and Scroll.in.

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Their “catchy songs and lively dances became the craze of Delhi”. That’s how the fisherfolk from the Colwad hamlet, in Mumbai’s Bandra neighbourhood, described their reception in the national capital in 1961, where they had been accorded the honour of being the newly formed state of Maharashtra’s first-ever representatives at the Republic Day Parade. So catchy were their tunes, they even got Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to dance with them, a Koli cap on his head.

Fifty six years later, the song that the Colwad Musical and Dramatic Union performed for India's first prime minister serves as a reminder that it's impossible to predict how sounds will travel – taking new forms as they float along, inspiring unlikely characters and sparking new endeavours.

The Bandra troupe had already been in Delhi for three days before their encounter with Nehru. They had reached the capital on January 20, 1961, and were allotted Tent No 127 in the Talkatora Folk Dancers Camp. Around them were performers from the 17 states that constituted the Indian Union at that time. “Hundreds of other folks from India's Plains, Hills and Tribal areas were accommodated in similar tents for the occasion,” a Colwad Union brochure recalled later. “The vast forest-like area was transformed [into] a huge Carnival Town with diverse languages, colourful costumes, queer customs, strange musical instruments, song, dance and joy.”

The young men and women were given blankets, jerseys, socks and heaters to protect them from the Delhi chill. They marvelled at the facilities in their tent city: it had fruit stalls, photo studios, a laundry, post office and a dispensary. The police and military kept watch over the facility to ensure that it was secure. They were also called upon to demonstrate their proposed items to the Delhi Academical Committee, which was “responsible for the proper presentation of the cultural items with uniformity of music, dance, lyrics, strictly National”, said their brochure.



When Nehru visited the camp on January 23, the Bandra troupe greeted him with a trumpet fanfare. A tikka was put on his head and shouts of “Jai Hind” rang out. “Besieged and lost in excitement, a fisherman’s cap was put on his head and a shawl placed on his shoulders,” the brochure said. “The Defence Minister stood in utter surprise.”

The song Nehru danced to was a traditional Koli tune with a refrain that went, “*Sonaiachi kaulla gharawarti*” – golden tiles on top of the house.



The excitement wasn't over. On January 25, the Colwad Union performed at a Concert of Songs of National Builders on All India Radio. They performed a tune written by their founder, Lawrence D'Mello, that praised Mumbai's development, mentioning the presence of the Aarey Milk Colony, the International Airport, the Trombay Atomic Power station and "deep sea fishing" which had been made possible with "the mechanisation of fishing boats".

The next day, they sang and danced their way down Rajpath. In the stands were Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip, who were the chief guests at that year's ceremony.



The Colwad Musical and Dramatic Union was already 50 years old by the time its members represented Maharashtra to the nation. It had been founded in 1914 by Lawrence D'Mello, an employee of the Central Railway and a passionate folklorist, to "promote social and cultural welfare through the medium of music and drama". The highlight of the Union's

year was its Christmas concerts, held on the grounds of St Peter's Church in Bandra. The programme consisted of songs, dances and plays that reflected the life of East Indians, as Christians native to the Mumbai region are known.

“The annual entertainment...was attended by hundreds of people from Bandra, the suburbs and Salsette,” recalled Lawrence D'Mello's son Ralph, in an unpublished memoir titled *Boy from Bandra*. The crowds would come by bullock cart and stay overnight on the church grounds. Ralph D'Mello made his performing debut as part of a group act in 1940, aged four and a half. In 1945, the concerts moved to the newly constructed hall of St Stanislaus School, above St Peter's Church.

In the early years, the programmes consisted of songs aimed at moral instruction. Eventually, Lawrence D'Mello would compose about 250 songs “directed against the ills of the day”, Ralph D'Mello recalled, in addition to about 40 Marathi comedies. Between his duties as an assistant controller of stores in the Central Railway, Lawrence D'Mello would spend hours transcribing East Indian folk melodies and composing new tunes.

“We were always surrounded by music in Bandra: folk, religious and classical,” Ralph D'Mello writes. “The East Indian love of music came from their ancestors, the Maharashtrians, who had a song for every hour and chore of the day.” When the Portuguese came to acquire Bombay and its environs in the second part of the sixteenth century, their new converts to Christianity were taught how to play Western musical instruments and to read and write Western notation. Soon enough, traditional Maharashtrian melodies acquired a new twist. Among the earliest musical artefacts from that time is the *Krista Purana*, an epic poem about the life of Christ composed in Marathi and Konkani by the English Jesuit, Thomas Stephens. The poem consists of 11,000 stanzas and is still sung in some parts of

Bandra and Vasai, an extended suburb of Mumbai, during Lent.

In 1945, Lawrence D'Mello became the leader of St Paul's Band, which had been founded on Easter Day, 1890, by Father John D'Mello. The bandsmen, dressed in white with red collars, cuffs and trimmings, performed at church processions from Dadar to Bassein and Thane, and at bandstands around the city. Their repertoire included marches like *Old Comrades*, *Colonel Bogey* and *Bozda*, recalled Ralph D'Mello, who joined the band – which practised in the family's living room on Bandra's Chapel Road – as a teenager.

While soaking in traditional melodies, the D'Mello children also acquired a passion for another kind of music – jazz. By the 1950s, Lawrence D'Mello's eldest son Peter D'Mello (centre, standing), and his three brothers were at the core of one of Mumbai's hottest jazz band: Tony played trumpet and piano, Louis played the trumpet (extreme left), while Ralph played clarinet, saxophone and flute (extreme right). Their admirers included Niranjana Jhaveri and Coover Gazdar, the editors of the short-lived jazz magazine *Blue Rhythm*, who dropped in on the D'Mello home in September 1952. "What impressed me was their approach to music," Gazdar wrote in the magazine later. "Though semi-professional, their love for jazz was akin to that of a collector, which in itself is something to write about."



Peter D'Mello and his Swing Band.

Bandra was a very different place when the *Blue Rhythm* editors visited. The landfills that would eventually create the Reclamation had not yet begun, and the backdoors of the homes on Chapel Road opened out on a creek. Many residents of the area were Koli fishermen, as was reflected in the name of their neighbourhood: Colwad was a contraction of “Koliwada” or hamlet of the Kolis. The D'Mellos were Kolis themselves.



Bandra creek, before the reclamation.

As it turns out, the Colwad Union's turn at the 1961 parade wasn't the last time the Koli tune *Gharawarti* was performed at the Republic Day event. Four years later, an army marching band performed a version of the tune, titled *Colwad*.

The tune has been included on an album titled *Martial Music of the Indian Army* and this is what the line notes say: "Colwad was the name of a village in the Bombay coast; it is now part of Bandra. This quick march is based on folk tunes of this old village which are still sung today."

The composer of the tune is Ralph D'Mello. Ralph was the only one of the D'Mello brothers who went on to make music his career. In the 1950s, as he played jazz with his brothers, he also sat in on clarinet with the Bombay Symphony Orchestra. In 1959, the orchestra had a guest conductor: Howard Boatwright, a Fulbright scholar who was helping music teachers at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Chowpatty understand Western pedagogic techniques. In the US, Boatwright was an associate professor at the Yale Music School and conducted the Yale Symphony Orchestra. He was so impressed by the young Ralph D'Mello that he recommended him for a scholarship at his institution.

After getting his degree at Yale, Ralph D'Mello returned to India and the only job that seemed to let him use his musical education was at the Military School of Music in Pachmarhi, where bandsmen for the armed forces were trained. For three years from 1964, Ralph D'Mello served as Assistant Director of Music for the Indian Army. In addition to his teaching, he also did some composing. He then returned to the US to get a PhD at Syracuse University. He spent his career teaching at Syracuse University, eventually becoming assistant to the chairman of the music education department. In 1971, he was among the founders of the Society for New Music in New York, which encouraged composers to write new classical music works. He still performs regularly.



Howard Boatwright conducts the Bombay Symphony Orchestra.

The story of this song has special resonance for *Scroll.in*. Our main offices are located in the house on Chapel Road in which the D'Mello family once lived.



Galyat Sankali Sonyachi.

Decades after Ralph D'Mello wrote *Colwad*, Koli tunes have continued to inspire composers. Here's what Nadeem-Shravan came up with in *Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin* in 1991. Listen for echoes of *Colwad* in the second section of the song.



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