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# Explorations of four *Dhenugals* in Alibag, District Raigad

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**Abstract:** *Dhenugal* (cow-calf stone) was used to show the boundaries of the donated village and land. A cow and calf are carved on this rectangular vertical stone. The cow is the symbol of the king and the calf is the symbol of the subjects. Just as the cow rears the calf, the king rears the subjects. The analysis of Numerous *Dhenugal* stones has been done to determine the significance of the epigraphical information carved on them. The engraved illustrations on *Dhenugal*'s required further study and consideration. This paper will attempt to analyze the illustration on the four newly discovered *Dhenugal* stones in Raigad District.

**Keywords:** *Dhenugal*, cow-calf stone, Govatsa Shilpa, Alibag, Raigad, stone steles

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## Introduction

Alibag is a coastal city and a municipal council in Raigad district of Maharashtra, India. It is the headquarters of the Raigad district and is south of the city of Mumbai. Raigad was ruled by different dynasties at different periods. The region was ruled by the Kamboja dynasty, Satavahanas, Kshatrapas, Kardamakas, Simukas, Vakatakas of Vatsagulma, Mauryas and Nalas, Traikutakas, Shilaharas, Yadavas, Delhi sultanate, Marathas and Peshwas. Raigad was known to be the very heart of Maratha country wherein the fierce battle was fought in 1656 and eventually Shivaji defeated Chandarrao More and won the Raigad fort.

Alibag is home to memorial stones or stone steles of the Shilahara dynasty. These stone steles include *Gadhegals* (ass curse stones), *Satishila* (sati stones), *Nagshila* (snake stones), *Veergals* (hero stones) and *Dhenugals* (cow calf stone).

## History

Dhenugal means a cow calf stone. It is also known as ‘*Govatsa shilpa*’. It is a land grant stone.

During the period of the Shilahar kings (AD 810 - AD 1260), Dhenugal was a government deed as a written proof of land donation. This stone was used to mark the boundary of a donated village or when land was donated for a specific purpose. During the period of the Shilahara kings, donation texts were written on the stones and such stones were made to announce it and follow the rules written to the subjects. Dhenugal is a vertical slab of stone divided into three parts and it contains following symbols:

1. Sun and moon:- Lunar Sun is considered to be inexhaustible. So as long as the moon and sun are in the sky, this donation remains intact.
2. *Mangal kalash*:- A coconut kept vertically inside a pot. This symbol is considered auspicious.
3. Cow Calf:- This Shilahara (9th to 13th century AD) symbol to indicate the land donated by the king for cows or the boundaries of sacred groves. This practice has been going on since the Shilahara period.

## Objectives of the Research

- Exploration and mapping of *Dhenugals*.
- To study the sculptural representation on the *Dhenugal*.

## Research Methodology

In May 2023, the author explored the sites of Bamanoli (18°40’30.6” N, 72°52’45.55” E), Bandhan (18°40’31.9” N, 72°59’06.5” E), Shreegaon (18°40’8.2” N, 72°59’51” E) and Borghar (18°33’50.8” N, 72°58’53.7”) (Figure 1). These explorations were carried out by referring to an article by Amit Samant who had spotted some *Dhenugal* stones in Raigad. The author identified four *Dhenugals* that share

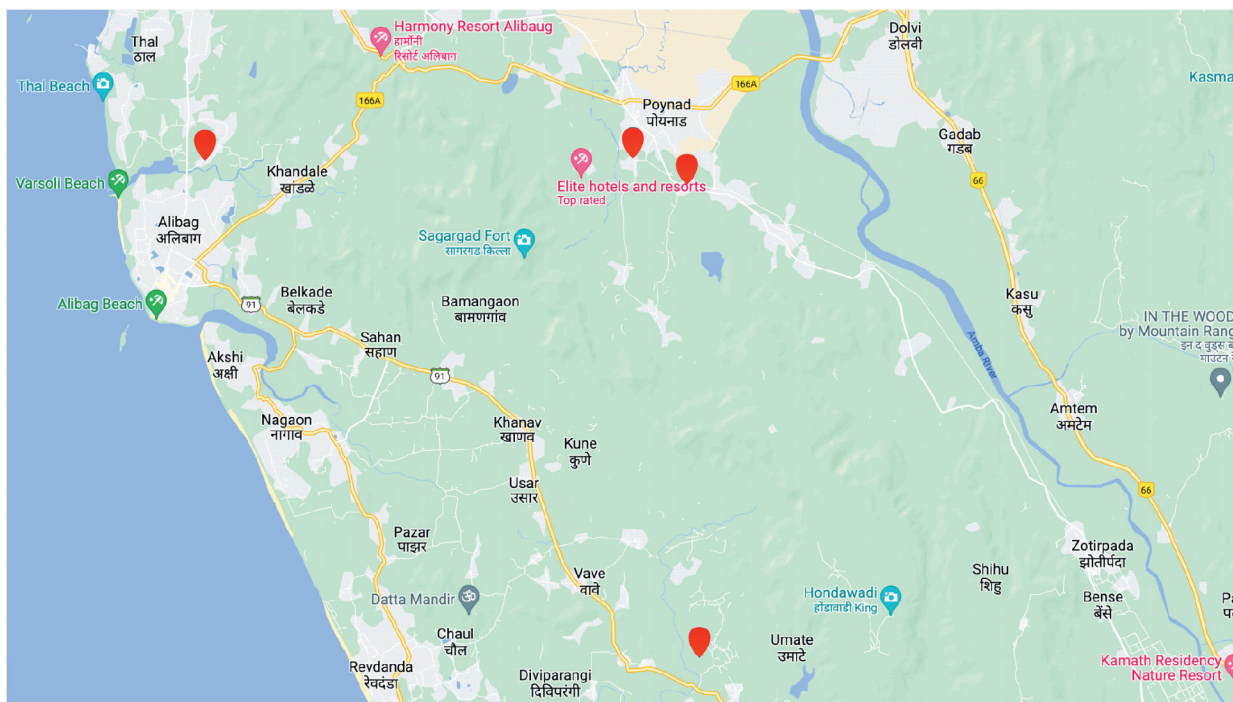


Figure 1: Map showing locations of four *Dhenugals* discovered in Alibag, district Raigad

Source: author.

an identical visual style among these previously well-known but little-studied sculptures. The author used modern technology, such as photography, Google Earth Pro, and GPS to map and document the *Dhenugals*. The author explored and documented the *Dhenugals*. The author also interviewed local people to understand their interpretation of the sculptural representation on *Dhenugals*

### **Dhenugal at Bamanoli, Alibag**

On the way from Alibaug to Revas, there is a village called Bamanoli (18°40'30.6" N, 72°52'45.55" E), about two and a half kilometers to the right of the bridge on the Khadtal river (distance from Alibaug). A little further from the Khadtal bridge, this Dhenugal is located in front of a house on the left hand side of the road (Figure 2). Built like a small temple with a corrugated sheet roof above and a plinth below, this Dhenugal is 3 feet high and half a foot wide. The top right corner of the upper fragment is missing. Some flowers and a lamp are seen placed in front of it. An electric lamp can be seen inside at night.

These oblong stones have sun and moon on top which means that the law written on this stone will remain binding until the moon and sun are in the sky. The stele here has a crescent moon very prominently on top and a small circular sun carved on it. Below it is a sculpture of a cow and a calf in a rectangle inset box. The cow is the symbol of the king and the calf is the symbol of the subjects. It is said that a king obeys his subjects just as a cow obeys a calf. Some space appears to be left below it. In some places inscriptions are also seen on these stones. The family living here has conserved this stone very well.



**Figure 2: Dhenugal at Bamanoli, Alibag**

Source: Sushrut Nikalje





**Figure 3: Dhenugal at Bandhan MIDC, Alibag**

*Source: Nimish Thale*

### **Dhenugal at Bandhan MIDC, Alibag**

The Dhenugal at Bandhan MIDC ( $18^{\circ}40'31.9''$  N,  $72^{\circ}59'06.5''$  E) was reported to the author by Nimish Thale (Figure 3). It is lying outside the MIDC Water Treatment Plant. The central vertical portion of the Dhenugal is smeared with white paint making it difficult to decipher the illustration on the stone. This Dhenugal has a semicircular profile on the top. The top portion consists of a crescent moon and small circular sun illustration on it. The central portion is difficult to decipher due to weathering of rock and smearing of white paint. The lower portion consists of a cow and calf in a rectangular inset box.

### **Dhenugal at Shreegaon junction, Alibag**

Shreegaon village is located on the stretch Alibag-Pen road in between Pezari and Nagothane. The Dhenugal at Shreegaon is opposite Laxmi Narayan rice mill ( $18^{\circ}40'8.2''$  N,  $72^{\circ}59'51''$  E). It is lying in a heap of garbage deposited on the road (Figure 4). This Dhenugal was also reported by Nimish Thale. This Dhenugal has a pointed arch shaped profile on the top. The top portion consists of a 'mangal kalash' i.e. a coconut kept vertically inside a pot. There is a circle under the *Mangal Kalash* which might be the sun. *Mangal kalash* is symbolically considered to be auspicious. But the moon sculpture is missing. The central portion consists of a cow and a calf in a rectangular inset box. The lowermost panel is completely devoid of any inscription.



Figure 4: Cowstone at Shreegaon junction  
Source: Nimish Thale



Figure 5: Dhenugal at Borghar, Alibag  
Source: author

### Dhenugal at Borghar, Alibag

There is a small village called Borghar (18° 33 '50.8"N, 72° 58' 53.7"E) on the Alibag Roha road. Rich with all amenities, this village has hundreds of years of history. The Dhenugal was spotted on a pasture at some distance from the ancient Shiva temple in Borghar village (Figure 5). It has cow calf and moon sun in a recessed frame at the center and *mangal kalash* is carved on top. The lowermost panel is completely devoid of any inscription. The rectangular profile of this Dhenugal is intact.

Local villagers call this pasture the place of '*Gaikaapani*' because religious Muslims used to slaughter cows at this place. Hence the cow calf is carved on the stele. In the past, this area would definitely be rich in cows and cattle.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the available information, it would be appropriate to conclude that Raigad and the areas around it had a strong tradition of making and establishing *Dhenugals*. The *Dhenugals* of Bamnoli, Shreegaon, and Borghar resemble one another. This extraordinary coincidence increases the likelihood that these four *Dhenugals* were created simultaneously and by the same craftsmen, and that they might actually constitute a single set that established the area's boundaries.

The cow and calf are almost identical in their postures and placements, and the crescent moon that is visible in the center of the top panel adds another distinctive element. The author has seen *Dhenugals* from Aundhe Khurd in Maval taluka, Dundha Fort in Nashik nalasopara, bhayander west and Parel, Mumbai. All of these *Dhenugals* have a cow and a calf in a rectangular inset box.

The illustration of the sun and moon on the top panel is seen on almost all *Gadhegals*, sati-stones, hero-stones and other boundary markers but they are positioned next to each other and not on top of the other (like *Dhenugals*)



Dhenugals require far more scholarly attention than they have received till now because they include images and inscriptions that are crucial to historians and archaeologists trying to recreate the cultural geography and history of the Early Mediaeval period. It is essential to preserve these rare found steles because they are silent witnesses to history.

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