

Mysterious Piram - the Pirate Island?

By Sara Keller

The mysterious island of Piram takes centre stage of the Gulf of Cambay (Western India). It appears as a strategic spot on historical maps and its name conveys puzzling stories around the Gulf's rim. But nobody saw Piram. Is it a ghost island, an empty rock in the Gulf or a hideout for pirates? There is only one way to find out: to go and explore.



Pict.1: Piram Island from the lighthouse.

Courtesy: Sara Keller, 2012.

The moon has not yet crossed the horizon, and sea and sky are wrapping us in a single dark canvas, sprinkled with a multitude of sparkles. In this infinite décor, our boat is confidently going ahead, riding on the endless waves and orienting itself with stars and constellations - unless there are surrounding port's lights.

I'm amazed to see the two mariners defying the Gulf of Cambay by night and guiding so peacefully our boat through darkness and strong waves. "The narrow channel between Mallock Reef and Piram Island should not be used without local knowledge as the tide runs through at a great velocity and there is very little slack water" warns the Prostar Sailing Manual. Even Bhavnagar Gazetteer, 1969 mentioned: "So strong are the tides at Piram that in a light wind it is hopeless to keep a boat under control". The tide amplitude within the Gulf (about 11 meters) indeed stands amongst the highest in the world, and, at low tide, the sea scene disappears and gives space to endless sand shoal landscapes. We had to consult the tide time table, and wait for the high tide to start our journey from Ghogha, the Saurasthrian port located ten kilometers away from Piram Island. The Gulf is not only known for its high tide, but also for its strong under water currents. Here the tidal force pushes the water inside the Gulf and meets the huge flow of sweet waters from Narmada, Mahi, Tapti, Sabarmati, Ambika, Purna, Kim, Dhadhar and many other large rivers discharging into the Gulf. This constant water movement results in the creation of strong water currents and high wave activity, and it constantly changes the shape of seabed and sand bars. In short, the gulf is a terribly unstable area.

And this is unlike a new feature. Since centuries, chronicles and travelers are reporting about the dangers of the Gulf: According to the ancient 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea' (1st century AD), "Only sailors well acquainted with the tides and the channels in the Gulf could handle the ships. During the high springs the fury of the tide was so great that no anchor could hold against it. Large vessels caught in the tides were driven from their course with the speed of the current till they were stranded and wrecked on the shoals. Smaller boats often capsized." Foreign mariners trying to enter the Gulf without the help of a local pilot would definitely be caught, either in the low sand bars, or in the stone riff and shoals. It is said that local pirates were intentionally misguiding unknown trading ships and taking them on stone riffs to drown them and sack their goods. Ultimately only a good social networking in the first landing port (Somnath or any port of south Saurashtra, later on Ghogha, Diu, Surat etc) could help and save the merchants coming

from all part of the world to make trade and business in the famous Gujarati ports of Bharuch, Khambhat, Surat etc.

Swaying with the repetitive waves shaking our small boat, I'm trying to imagine those merchants, who, for centuries, were taking the same sea route, and crossing the Gulf with their ship loaded with pepper from Malabar, cinnamon from Sri Lanka and other exotic spices, Chinese silk, horses, etc. During the pre Mughal era, huge vessels (upto 1000 tons) importing merchandises from far east (China, Indonesia), Arabian countries, Swahili African coast or Europe would not be able to enter in the Gulf of Cambay: Reaching Ghogha, the goods had to be transferred into smaller ships which could drive safely between the riffs and shoals till Bharuch and Khambhat.



Pict.2: Navigation around Piram Island.

Courtesy: Sara Keller, 2012.

Piram is a small land strip, located off Kuda point near Ghogha, the straits of the Gulf. So Piram not only appears to be the single Island in this agitated sea, it also stands as the watch tower, the protective bastion of the Gulf. According to 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea', the island was a marker point while navigating within the gulf. History gives only few occupations records. The

first mention, and most glorious one, seals Piram's name with the destiny of Mokhadaji, the Gohil Rajput who took over Ghogha and built his fortress on Piram Island in the early 14th century. Historical sources defer about a probable settlement on Piram during this time but according to A.K. Forbes's *Ras Mala*, Muhammad Tughluq attacked in 1347, killed Mokhadaji, and the very same day destroyed the Piram fortress. Till today, sea men of the Gulf pay their tribute to Mokhadaji, either by visiting the island or the temple built in Bhavnagar in the Rajput's memory. The island might then have been deserted till the mid-18th century when Mulla Muhammad Ali, a merchant from Surat, attempted to settle there. But he failed to establish himself, fearing the furious climate. In 1864-65 British built a lighthouse on the ruins of Mulla Muhammad Ali's fort. The monument was well maintained, and its height was extended up to 27 meters in 1965. New optical equipment was also installed, and, till today, the lighthouse has a guardian who stays on the island and takes care of the tower.

The rotating signal of Piram lighthouse was seen soon after we left Ghogha. It guided our night voyage through the light garland of the Saurasthrian and Dahej coasts. After forty five minutes of a turbulent sea journey, two more small lights were seen below the alternating glare of the lighthouse. It seems that somebody was waiting for us there, on Piram, trying to guide us to a proper anchoring place.

We were approaching the island coast when we suddenly realized that a multitude of gigantic dark silhouettes were standing in front of our boat, as if some marine monsters had emerged from the water. On land, our hosts showing light started shouting and waving. On boat, the pilots, till now so confident, replied with loud and frightened voice. The boat was sliding closer to the dark immobile figures and we felt that we would break our fragile craft on some big rocks. But unexpectedly the monsters open a passage for us, forming a narrow corridor till the sea shore. We finally reached Piram safely.



Pict.3: Piram beach and lighthouse.
Courtesy: Sara Keller, 2012.

It is only the next morning, with day light, that the island would reveal its secrets to us, thanks to the considerate guidance of Siddhraj Sinh Raol of Varal, known as Banabapu, the owner of the island, and descendant of Mokhadaji, the proud Gohil Rajput. Banabapu not only knows each and every corner of the island, but he also had explored its geology, geography, history; he knows about its winds, its tides, its fauna and flora. For us the island first appeared to be a simple sand dune covered with thorns and endless acacia trees, but he soon revealed to us a cornucopia of natural and cultural heritage.



Pict.4: Mapping Piram.
Courtesy: Sara Keller, 2012.

Our very first surprise laid on the sea shore flooded with warm dawn light: The large mysterious figures which we saw at night were a thick vegetation formation standing in the water. Mangroves. This saline coastal vegetation grows in the intertidal mudflats, and represents a significant coastal ecosystem. They give a very unique look to the sea shore swamps due to their complex network of pneumatophores or aerial root structures, mostly visible at low tide.



Pict.5: Sunrise behind the mangrove of Piram island.
Courtesy: Ilesh Vyas, 2012.

We then slowly discovered that Piram bears a very rich estuarine ecosystem due to its location in a gulf where saline and fresh waters are constantly interacting. It therefore possesses unique oceanographic and geological features.

One of the stunning biodiversity of the island concerns the fauna: Apart from the diversity of migratory shorebirds and local marine species, like crabs, ray fishes, stingray, black tiger prawns, sea snakes, lobsters, etc., dolphins and some tropical waters whales are occasionally seen around the island. Olive ridleys, an endangered sea turtle species, can be observed close to the high shore on high tide, as they come there at daytime for nesting, a very rare phenomenon in India. At Piram their reproduction is saved as major predators like dogs and jackals are not present on the island.



Pict.6: Crab.

Courtesy: Sara Keller, 2012.

No wonder that Piram olive ridleys are very peculiar, they had very glorious predecessors. One of the extraordinary archeological discoveries of Piram indeed is the carapace of a gigantic tortoise, *Colossochelys atlas*, a turtle from the Miocene to the Pleistocene periods (a huge period from millions of years ago till 11,700 years ago). The fossil shows that the turtle had a length of more than six meters -a rare finding which comes on a long list of fossils and pre historical specimen traces identified in the hard ferruginous conglomerates shaping the island contours. Mid 19th century, British archeologists first drew the attention of the international scientist community about the richness of Piram fossils, especially from tertiary mammalian specimens. While several common species could be identified, some fossils appear to be rarely found in this part of the world. Let us for example mention the *Sivatherium Dinotherium Indicum*, or the *Bramatherium Perimense*, an extinct genus of giraffe and a palaeontological rarity as it forms a link between ruminants and large pachyderms.

This unique fossilized heritage can be explained by the long vivid history of Piram and its large geographical sphere, as a big part of the fossils would have been dragged to the gulf by alluviums of local rivers. Till today, *khandit murti* (damaged idols which can't be worship) offered to the Narmada river are washed ashore on Piram. The presence of extraordinary fossils on the island also results to the Pangaea and the ancient proximity of India with the African continent.



Pict.7: A *khandit murti* on the beach of Piram island.
Courtesy: Ilesh Vyas, 2012

Human civilizations also kept their mark on Piram: A multitude of archeological artifacts are found amidst the island and in the intertidal zone - sculptures, coins, doorjambs, stone wells and other findings. Stone carved artifacts would have come down from fort gates, and marble sculptures suggest that they were part of a temple. The sea passage off Ghogha also revealed several archeological evidences such as stone anchors and various glazed wares. Most remarkable are the stone walls remains bordering the north and North-west sea shore of the island. If not Mokhadaji's fortress, they anyway speak for the existence of a once-upon-a-time major coastal settlement on Piram. A pirate city?...

We are now patiently waiting for the tidal waters to come back so that our boat, lying on the lonely sand beach, floats again and takes us back to Ghogha. It is quiet, only the fresh marine breeze hums in our ears. The tide slowly lifts the boat, and we carry away with us the memory of a wonder land, a quiet receptacle of hundred and thousands of years of history. A treasure remaining safe in midst the uninterrupted movement of waters and lives in the gulf.