



The neighbourhood of Gamdevi in Grant Road derives its name from the renowned temple in the area dedicated to the 'goddess who guards' the locality, known in the past as 'Gaondevi' or 'Gamdevi'!

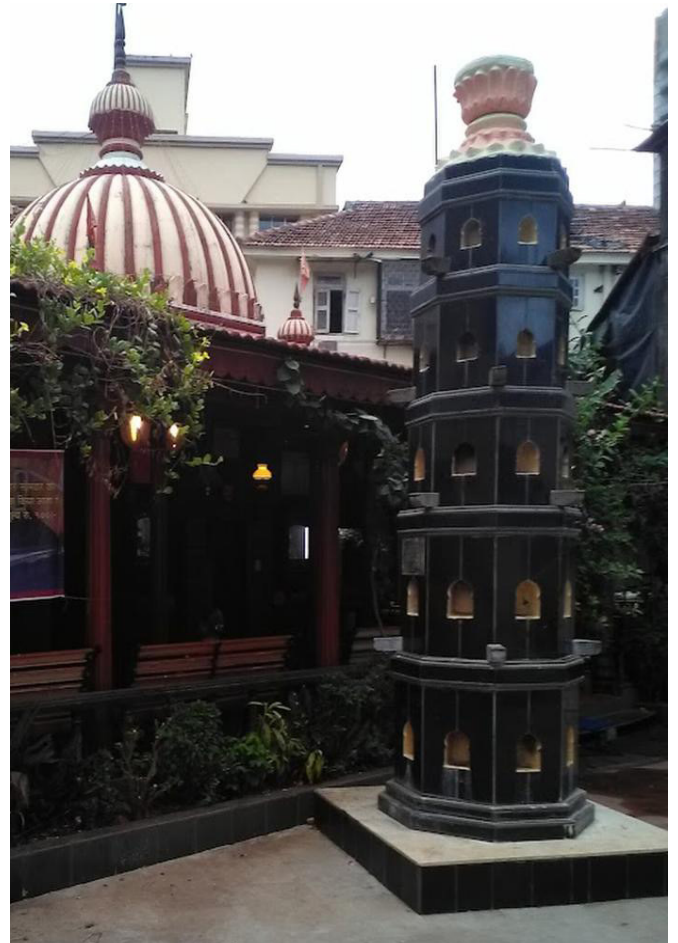
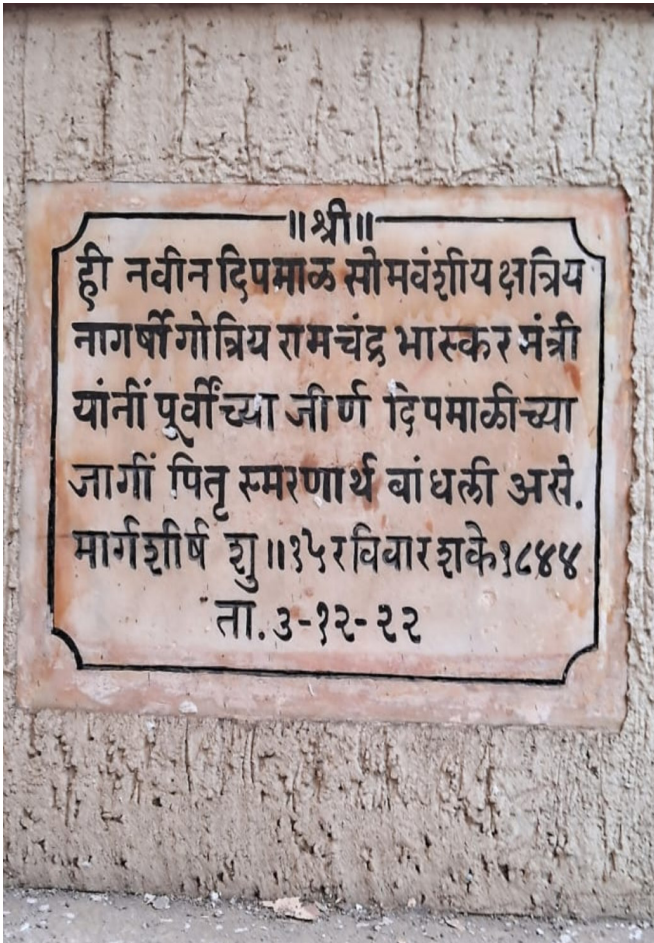
The story of the establishment of the Gamdevi temple begins with the apsaras. The seven protectors of the world, the Saptamatrukas or seven apsaras, are a group of goddesses considered to be benevolent and protective. They are celestial fairies admired for their beauty and artistic talents, often associated with dance and music. As per the legend, during a period of cosmic turmoil, the demon Andhakasura decided to challenge the gods. The gods realised that they needed a powerful force to counter the demon's strength. They collectively invoked their divine energy, and from this concentrated power emerged seven radiant goddesses. Each goddess embodied a different aspect of divine energy. These seven apsaras successfully vanquished Andhakasura. As a gesture of gratitude, the gods blessed these goddesses, granting them the status of divine mothers and protectors. Since then, the Saptamatrukas have become revered deities, often invoked for protection and strength in times of adversity (Goyal 2020).



In many places across India, there are special temples called Gaondevi temples. The word has evolved into Gamdevi. In an interview with historian Usha Vijaylakshmi, she traces the origin of Gaondevi temples. She states that these temples are not just places of worship, rather they have a unique purpose to serve. In the past, villages marked their boundaries with stones. However, at night, people would move these stones, leading to disputes over land among villagers. To solve this problem, communities built Gaondevi temples as permanent boundary markers. These temples could not be moved like the stones and it provided a lasting solution to boundary disagreements. The idea behind Gaondevi temples goes beyond practicality. People saw these temples as connections to their ancestors and God. The belief is that the place where the temple stands today is where their ancestors stood in the past. This connection to the divine power and their lineage is important to the people. Over time, this custom developed into the concept of Kuldevta, connecting individuals to their village and their family roots. People visit these temples annually to show gratitude, remembering the struggles and victories that took place on the same ground (Vijaylakshmi 2023).

But the origin of the Gamdevi temple at Girgaon is traced back to a divine dream. A man, asleep, dreamt of Gamdevi appearing before him, instructing him to build a temple over here. Describing herself as one of the seven sisters or apsaras ruling the seven worlds, she revealed her name as Gamdevi. The vivid details of her appearance included a green robe, a strip of red powder across her forehead, green bangles on her arms, and loose hair. The man shared the dream with his neighbours, and the news quickly spread. Subscriptions were raised, and the temple was constructed, featuring a large stone face of Gamdevi rubbed with red lead (Raghunathji 1895, 39-40).

Situated on Gamdevi Road, the Gamdevi Temple got its name from the goddess herself. Adjacent to it are two stone-made images known as Shitaladevi, created by an artist. The temple rituals include morning worship and evening lamp-waving, conducted by a Gujarati Brahman. The temple ground allows pradakshina or circumambulation and



measures about forty feet. The temple is a public property, and expenses are primarily covered by devotees. The temple's structure resembles a house, with the audience hall and sanctuary as one. Small wooden temples with brass pinnacles are constructed on the ground floor. The temple has three dipmals. A Nandadip is lit near the goddess.

A marble plaque at a Deepmala of the temple pronounces that the Deepwala was newly built in the auspicious Margashsish month in 1844. Thus, the temple's year of origin can easily date back to 200 years in the past. The Puran is read during the sacred months. During Navratri, Diwali and Dasara, the temple is lit up. A Ghat is set up near the goddess during Navratri. Havan is performed on the seventh day, and the Gondhal dance takes place. The Navachandi book is read by Brahmans for those seeking improvement or relief from ailments. The people who visit the temple witness a richly dressed goddess during these days. The temple is also dedicated to Sitaladevis, particularly worshipped in cases of diseases like smallpox, measles, or cowpox, believed to have origins in extreme body heat (Harper 1989, 35).

Close to Gaondevi Temple is Narmadeshwar, a Shiv Ling temple, featuring a pushkarni built by Dharmabai in 1749. Near it is an image of Ganpati with red lead. Both Gaondevi and Narmadeshwar celebrate an annual fair on the 15th of Margashirsha, attracting visitors with shops of toys and sweetmeats. The fair's expenses are covered by subscriptions from the affluent neighbours of the temple (Raghunathji 1895, 41-42).

The charm of the goddesses of Mumbai is that the idols face inwards, looking at the land, forming a protective ring around the city. This peculiar arrangement is not merely a matter of chance but a strategic response to the historical threat of pirates who once posed a menace to the coastal city. The Devis, revered as guardians, stand as vigilant custodians of the city against external threats. The temple symbolises a collective belief in the protective power of the deities, which sustains the faith of the city dwellers.

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