

Goan holidays - spent in the lap of nature

BY VEENA GOMES-PATWARDHAN

Whenever I'm feeling run down, burned out by the scorching pace of life in the city, all I have to do to refresh my drooping spirits, is take a short walk down memory lane. And in my mind, even if it's only for a few precious moments, I'm back in the 1960s, in the Goa of my childhood days. A Goa that was as beautiful as a pretty country maid, whose natural beauty had no need for the garish make-up of the trappings of modernity. Holidays in Goa were spent, not in the lap of luxury, but in the lap of nature. Those were the days before electricity came to Goa. A time when there were no electric lights, no fans, no air conditioners, no refrigerators, no mixers, and yes, no television. Yet, life was good. Life was beautiful. Though things were done differently, lifestyles were more in harmony with nature. Men wore hats when they went outdoors. Women carried parasols as protection from the sun. And along with a rosary and prayer book, a collapsible fan was an accessory they couldn't do without when they went to church. I remember my Aunty Laura's prized possession was a beautiful Japanese fan my Uncle Nolasco had picked up on one of his many voyages to Japan during his tarvotti days. It was really a pretty sight to see the women among the congregation in church, fluttering fans in a variety of designs and colours, their faces framed by beautifully patterned veils.

But the sweltering heat did not bother us kids. How we loved spending every waking moment out of doors! The morning hours would fly past in a whirl of activities. Then, by noon, the tantalizing aromas of meals being cooked on smoky wood fires would drift across the air from every home. Yet, ignoring the rumblings in our stomachs, we would play on till we were literally dragged indoors for lunch. Polishing off a hearty meal in record time, we would scamper outside again. We would romp through fragrant chilli fields or swing from ropes tied to the low branch of a mango tree with the wind whipping through our hair. Sometimes, we would even attempt climbing a coconut tree. But the gashes made by renders in the trunk were inevitably too far spaced out for us kids to scale more than a few feet. Those were the days when, except for the houses along the roadside, hardly anyone erected boundary walls to demarcate private property and obstruct free movement. As we pranced around among the trees and played in the open spaces between houses, uninhibited and without a care in the world, even the swaying palms seemed to nod in approval. Today, in an age when every inch of property is fiercely protected, kids will never know what it was like before boundary walls divided the people of Goa.

By the time we got back indoors, we were a tired, bedraggled lot, covered with mud from head to toe. One by one we would then have a bath with well water heated in a large copper pot. At dusk, the huge lamps hanging from the ceiling in the hall had to be lowered and lit along with the smaller kerosene lamps that we could carry from room to room. The lamps would attract strange-looking insects, big and small, but we got used to them.

After dinner, Dad would spread mats on the sand in front of our house. There we would stretch out on either side of him and gaze up in awe at the sky. Dad would ask us, "Have you ever seen such a star-studded sky in Bombay?" Indeed we hadn't. With darkness cloaking the entire neighbourhood, the stars here dazzled like a myriad diamonds against a dark velvet sky. They even seemed to hang much lower than in Bombay. Finally, it would be time to whisper goodnight to our twinkling friends in the sky and get back indoors.

Each night we would repeat 'Deo bori raat...' after Grandfather, following which he would bless each of us in turn. We would then drop off to sleep with the fascinating tales of ghosts, house snakes and kolho mama and kolhi mami ringing in our ears. It might seem unbelievable today, but

we actually went to sleep with the doors and windows wide open. What's more, the windows didn't have any grills. Only the kitchen had to have the windows firmly shut and the door bolted to keep out the neighbour's cat!
