



SUMMER HOLIDAY IN GOA

Veena Gomes-Patwardhan

"GOA, GOA, *mhunnon sogleanich marlo dhaon*," crooned the late Alfred Rose in one of his popular numbers. The scenario depicted here aptly describes what the natives of *dourada* Goa in Bombay (aka Mumbai) do each year in the summer time. They pack their bags and head back home in droves. It's always been that way ever since the large-scale migration of Goans to Bombay and other parts of British India at the turn of the twentieth century.

Around twenty-two hours - that's how long it took, back then in the 'sixties, when I was a schoolgirl, to make the journey from Bombay to Goa by sea or rail. Since none in my family was prone to seasickness, we usually made the trip to Goa and back by ship. For those who could stomach travelling by sea, there were other compensations. Just viewing the swift descent of the fiery sun into the sea from the deck of the ship at sunset and again watching it rise majestically over the Sahayadri Mountains the next morning made the voyage worth it.

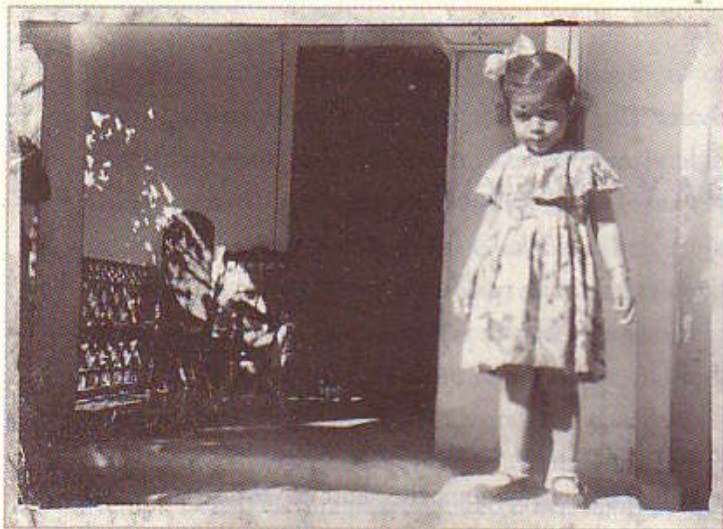
The summer holiday in Goa was our annual tryst with nature. While my parents, like other grown-ups loved the peace and quiet, my siblings and I enjoyed the privilege of running around wild and free in the

countryside. Like captive birds let out of a cage, we revelled in our freedom, the sight of vast expanses of open fields all around sending our spirits soaring.

After dark, the eerie sounds emanating from the stillness of the night were rather unnerving, but the mornings were glorious. Each day, we would awake after a restful night's sleep to the sound of bird-song and looked forward to the miracle of a new day unfolding.

Rushing out on to the *balcao*, we would find the pitcher we had placed there the night before, filled to the brim with sweet, fresh toddy brought by Manuel, the local toddy-tapper. As we waited for Mum to pour some of it out into glasses for us, we would sit on the front steps breathing in the heady scent of St. Anthony's flowers and watch, with fascination, the swarms of colourful butterflies flitting among the flower beds in our little garden. This was a rare sight for us city kids who were only used to seeing flies, not butterflies!

After feasting on delicacies like *sannam*' and tender coconut, we would run outdoors to play in the shade of fruit-laden mango trees or beneath a canopy of palm trees.



The author as a child on holiday in Goa

Every now and then, the dull thud of mangoes knocked down by gusts of wind would send us scrambling helter-skelter to look for the fallen fruit. Sometimes, we would run along tiny streams, stopping time and again to peer at the different varieties of fish darting about beneath the surface.

Another favourite pass-time was chancing our arm at flinging flat little stones into the small *fondaro* behind our house. It required skill and practice to get a stone to strike the water at the right angle and make it do a *beduk*, i.e. skip across the surface simulating the leaps of a frog.

Engrossed in trying to better each other's *beduk* score, a sudden flash of vivid blue in the background would often catch our attention. We would look up to see a kingfisher perched on a waterside shrub overlooking our pond. The shallow waters of ponds like ours made them a perfect hunting ground for these magnificent birds. We used to see lots of them then. (Nowadays, they can be seen more on hoardings

displaying ads for beer!)

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. I remember how we had to be literally dragged indoors for lunch.

Polishing off a hearty meal in record time, we would scamper outside again. There were so many exciting things we could do, like romping through fragrant chilly fields or swinging from ropes tied to the branch of a mango tree with the wind whipping through our hair or even attempting to climb a coconut tree.

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. Those were the days before electricity came to Goa. So, 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!* (May God grant you a good night) after Grandfather, following which he would bless each of us in turn. 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!

In the last week of April, the novenas to the Holy Cross would begin all over Goa. Like everywhere else, after the customary bursting of crackers, a motley group of young and old would gather each evening for the *ladainha* (litany) around the cross in front of our house. A simple white-washed cross, built by my grandfather and one of the thousands dotting Goa's landscape.

In the warm glow of burning candles we would begin by singing a hymn in Konkani dedicated to the Holy Cross, followed by one in Portuguese. Next in line would be hymns to St. Anthony (the patron saint of our area, Deussua, Chinchinim) and St. Sebastian, culminating with the Litany of Our Lady, all sung to

the accompaniment of the sweet strains of violins.

Singing would be full-throated and in voices, *primeiro* and *segundo*, led by our neighbour, Cornelio Verdes, whom everyone affectionately called Papa. Without him the *ladainha* wouldn't start, and, without him, the singing wouldn't have sounded as sweet. Once the prayers were over, *biscut* from Krishna's *posro* (traditional village shop) would be distributed by the family hosting the *ladainha* for the day. The crowd would then disperse to meet again the next evening, and for the next nine evenings, but not before a couple of rounds of small goblets of *branco* wine and *feni* had been quickly downed by the gents.

On *festa dis* (the big day of the feast), elaborate preparations for the decoration of the area around the cross would start from morning. Tender palm fronds would be gathered and bent to form an arch in front of the cross. Seated in his *balcao* with his legs hoisted up on the long arms of his grandfather chair (a sort of earlier, wooden version of Joey's and

The author and her friends on a beach in Goa



Chandler's reclining arm-chairs in the TV serial 'Friends'), my grand-uncle, Roquiziñho, would teach us to cut and shape pretty flowers out of purple, pink and white tissue paper. Bunches of these would be used to embellish the palm leaf arch. He would also show us how to make attractive paper lanterns from ordinary white paper covered with splashes of bright paint. These would be strung together to span the gap between the trees around the Cross.

The *ladainha* that evening would have a more elaborate tune for the Litany and would end with a robust rendering of "Viva, viva, viva, viva!" in Portuguese. Once sweets and drinks had been served, a group of young boys would assemble in a field nearby to launch a *bapor*, a sort of huge, inverted lantern made from coloured tissue paper, with a kerosene-soaked rag tied to the cross wires underneath.

The burning rag would heat and expand the air inside the *bapor*, giving it the necessary thrust to rise upwards. A successful launch would be met with great excitement, almost matching that at NASA when a rocket takes off without a hitch. With bated breath we would wait and watch it soar high up into the sky and then slowly glide far away towards the next village. Sometimes, we would see other *bapors* released by people from neighbouring villages sailing past, bright floating specks in the night sky.

Unfortunately, the Cross Feast in many parts of Goa has lost much of its earlier enthusiasm and spirit of bonhomie. This year, it was so sad to learn that at another cross close to my ancestral home, the members actually decided to have a *ladainha* only on the first day and the feast day and on one day in between.

The reason (Can you believe it?) was because, leave alone having no-one to play the violin, no one was available to lead the singing! How could something like this happen in a community that has always had music pulsing through its veins? I sincerely hope this scenario is not being repeated in other villages. For it is events like the Cross Feast that keep not only traditional customs, but also a sense of community alive in Goa. I remember how my own parents would encourage us to take part in the singing at every *ladainha* we attended. And like the rest of the kids, even if we didn't know the sequence of lines in the Litany, at least we sang *Ora pro nobis* lustily, at the top of our voices.

Even as we were thoroughly enjoying ourselves, our holiday mood would be rudely interrupted by the mandatory visits to relatives. We were too small then to understand the importance of keeping in touch. But when I see the strong bonds forged with so many of our relatives enduring till today, I thank God for the efforts made by my parents to help us get to know our relations in Goa. These visits would sometimes entail a cross-country walk stretching over a good three to four kilometers or so. Trudging over all that sandy terrain was really killing, to say the least. Thankfully, sometimes we could cover part of the distance by boat, with a *taria* ferrying us across some small river on the way.

To visit relatives living really far away however, we had to take a *carreira*, one of the many quaint little buses that heaved and swayed down narrow mud roads, always chock-a-block with passengers.

You only had to shout 'Rab re' (Hey, stop) and the

driver would willingly stop anywhere for you to either get in or get off.

While this unique business strategy was convenient for the passenger being obliged, it left the rest fuming, specially when elderly aunties, with umbrellas unfurled, took their time to walk down the path from their doorsteps to the road while a bus load of passengers sweated it out inside the vehicle.

Many a dirty look would be aimed at new passengers when, to make room for them, the heartless conductor would shout 'Mukar vos, mukar vos' (Get ahead, get ahead) to the hapless standees, already crushed cheek by jowl, not unlike sardines in an under-sized tin. But if you were lucky enough to find a seat, the view from the windows was truly breathtaking.

Since we were in beach country, a day or two at the seashore was always a part of our holiday itinerary. In those days, Goa really did have virgin beaches. Beaches of pristine beauty where you could have your fill of sun and surf in splendid seclusion. Dad specially liked to take us to the beach when dawn was just breaking, in time for us to see the fishing boats coming in. Finding a convenient spot to sit, we would watch the fisher-folk hauling in their nets and emptying their silvery contents into trenches in the sand.

Goa was always the perfect getaway. But all too soon for us, our holiday would draw to a close and it would be time to take the ship back to Bombay. This time, the joyful anticipation that marked our onward journey would be missing. After succumbing to the leafy cool of lush palm groves and chilling out on



A handful of shells,
a shore full of sand
and little footprints...

breezy *balcaos*, the thought of crawling back into our little cubby holes in the concrete jungle was certainly unappealing.

Come June, shiploads of Goans would reluctantly return to the city of gold, the city to which their ancestors had migrated many years before to 'earn their bread' or *ganhar pao*, as they had stated at the immigration check point as the reason for migrating from Portuguese Goa to Indian territory.

As the taxis maneuvered their way out of the dock in Bombay and whizzed past on the roads leading to Dhobitalao or other Goan populated areas like Mazagon (where we lived), everyone would know that the ship from Goa had arrived and that the *Goencars* were back from the land of *sussegad*. The giveaways were the plump jackfruits and bulging sacks of coconuts strapped to the carriers of the taxis.