

SEEING AND BELIEVING: FOLK INGENUITY AND BELIEFS ABOUT NATURE

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Abstract:

Much has been said and written about art and religion as human expressions. Anthropologists have long theorized about the roots of religion stemming from man's insecurity with nature. For Early Man, Nature was a life giving and life destroying force, a mysterious and powerful self-contradictory entity. As Man attributed divine and human qualities to nature, there came a major shift from instinctive to intellectual practices. The new terms of engagement with nature became "appeasement". This could be the earliest beginnings of creative thinking – a preoccupation with ways of appeasing, and ways of perpetuating ideas of divinity and appeasement. In her paper, Dr.Gomes explores the ingenuity with which the tribes of Goa have created dramatic images and performances in their folklore, in an attempt to gain symbolic mastery over nature, simultaneously etching a body of beliefs and practices in the collective mind.

Antiquity: Early man was dependent on nature and at the same time unable to control its destructive force. It was at once life giving and life destroying. A powerful self-contradictory entity that was a mystery. Man was caught in a paradoxical situation. He was completely dependent on nature, and nature controlled him completely.

Man's primary engagement with nature was for obtaining survival resources. The experience thrust him into a new cognitive state. He saw nature as displaying qualities like his horde members. Men could get destructive, so could nature. Men could be helpful and protective, so could nature. Armed with primordial analogies, primitive man simultaneously attributed divine and human qualities to nature. Thus nature was sought to be controlled on the lines of social control and reciprocity in society.

With this came a major shift from instinctive practices to intellectual practices. Henceforth began a radically different domain of human activity. The new terms of engagement with nature became "appeasement". This could be the earliest beginnings of creative thinking. A preoccupation with ways of appeasing, and ways of perpetuating ideas of divinity and appeasement.

From primordial beginnings to this day we can see man's ingenuity in creating impressionable images and performances, in an attempt to gain symbolic mastery over nature. Simultaneously etching a body of beliefs and practices in the collective mind.



Betal : The Guardian Spirit, Loliem, South Goa.

Animism, as explained by E.B. Taylor, the earliest known belief of attributing a soul to animate and inanimate objects, seems to be at the core of all creative thinking. Little doubt that animistic traditions are still living traditions today. They may have gone through millennia of improvisations, and several medieval and modern day faiths, yet the core of many of our celebrations remains animistic. To observe how it looks in practice, we can take a panoramic view of some celebrations in Goa.

Interlude: The tiny state of Goa carries a popular image of being one of the most westernized states in India. Culture and image aside, first a look at its ecology. The state is flanked by the Arabian sea to the west and the towering Western Ghats to the east. Some portions rising into high peaks like the *Sonsogad, Catlanchimauli, Wagheri*. All the rivers flow from east to west, starting from the ghats, snaking their way through the plains before emptying out into the Arabian Sea. In some places they drop as awesome falls, the most famous being the Dudhsagar falls. The topography of the land has created a great diversity in natural wealth.

The diversity of this wealth is so reflected in the wealth of folklore and folk performances in Goa.

Panorama: One of the oldest visible signs of animistic traditions in Goa is the deification of natural phenomena such as :



Ancient Rock Art at Usgalimol - A, South Goa.

Waterfalls and springs:

The Dudhsagar waterfalls which flows from the ghats is revered as a God by the *Gouly* tribe of Goa. They inhabit the eastern half of the state's territory. These pastoral nomads are still nature worshippers. They do not build temples but maintain many sacred groves. The Dudhsagar being the most majestic falls in the *Gouly* homeland is naturally seen as God.

Spring waters are often attributed with healing and rejuvenating properties. They are believed to be the abodes of Gods and Goddesses. To name a few, *Kapil tirth* on Paroda hill, *Pandavam zor* at Betul plateau. Gracias in her book 'Health and Hygiene in Colonial Goa', has listed the numerous springs that have been attributed with sacred healing properties.

In Copardem village, Sattari taluka, there's a spring so well-known for its healing properties, that people have created a dharmshala at the Brahmani Mahamaya temple near the stream.

Caves:

These natural shelters probably used by early settlers, are believed to be the dwelling places of local guardian spirits. In many places they are also connected with the Pandavas.

In South Goa there are several natural caves believed to have drawn the Buddhist monks for meditation. Local stories passed down from generation speak of how the early people just felt the presence of the divine in such caves.

These dark mysterious stone wonders became sacred spaces. They were often sought for their quietness where people could reflect on the power of nature and relax too. No wonder caves were transformed into a stone canvas for rock paintings and engravings depicting animals and man.

Termite mounds:

Known as *Roen* in the Konkani language. This is a very important symbol of the Earth Mother Goddess in Goa. The mound itself is identified as *Santeri*, the local name for the Goddess. She is also known by later names such as *Shantadurga*, *Bhoomika*, *Lirae*. The termite mound has come to represent the creative power of nature. It is seen as the womb which grows and nurtures new life.

Termite mounds are like air-conditioned units the termites have to maintain a constant humidity and temperature. If any part of the mound is damaged, they repair it with amazing speed. It must have been a wonder for primitive people to see a mound of mud grown overnight.



Ancient Rock Art at Usgalimol - B, South Goa.

The termitomyces mushroom grows well at abandoned termite mounds. Primitive man associated the sprouting of the mushroom as a phallic symbol. It is said that the name Santeri comes from opened mushroom. It resembles an umbrella. Incidentally the Konkani word for an umbrella is *santri*. The termite mound was thus adopted as the feminine principle in nature and the mushroom as the masculine principle. Together they formed the fertility symbols of life and life giving nature.

One of the remnants of the ancient traditions of *Santeri* worship, can be seen in the church of Santa Anna at Telaulim in Tiswadi taluka. It is called the *toushanchem fest* (cucumber festival). There probably was a temple dedicated to Santeri in the village. Today it is the church of Santa Anna. It may not be a coincidence that the church was dedicated to the mother of the virgin Mother Mary.

When the people converted to the new faith, they incorporated the new mother into the same ancient matrix of earth mother worship.

It was a tradition for newly wedded couples to offer cucumbers (again a phallic symbol) to the Goddess, to grant the favour of a male child. This tradition continues till date.



Dudhsagar Waterfalls : God of the Goulys, South Goa.

Natural stone:

Sacred stones representing ancestors (*visavo*) and stones in which the clan gods (*tandle*) are believed to dwell have a special place in the lives of the Goa *Goulys* even today. They are a pastoral tribe, and had been nomadic in the past. The other tribal group in Goa, the *Kunbi* which consists of the *Velip* and *Gavdi*, also have numerous sacred stones.

These are symbols of ancestors and local guardian spirits. They are called by the suffix of *purus*. There are shrines to *Rampurus*, *Kalpurus*, *Khuntipurus*. All such spots have stone symbols. In some places they are incorporated as shivlingas. The older natural stone symbols representing the ancestors are still retained outside the temples.

Perhaps the finest example of natural stone and its connection to animistic beliefs, is witnessed at the devasthan of *Shri Chandreshwar Bhutnath* atop the Chandranath peak in the taluka of Quepem. The two temples are built around the original sacred stones.

According to local legends in the villages, the God Chandreshwar came down from the sky in fine fiery grandeur, on a full moon night. The villagers who witnessed the event trudged up the hill next day to see what had happened. Lo and behold!



they saw the dark sacred stones. Since it happened on a full moon night one stone was attributed to the moon, and was named *Chandreshwar*. The smaller stone was named *Bhutnath*.

One can only put together by conjecture what may have happened on that moonlit night. Perhaps a fiery shooting star? A meteorite? Whatever it may have been, it was sufficient to inspire awe in the people's mind, and deify the celestial phenomenon.

In the neighbouring village near San Jose de Areal a Holy Cross chapel houses the main Cross on a similar ancestral stone.

Sacred Stones : Subdalem, South Goa.

On the outskirts of the village of *Usgalimol* in Sanguem taluka, south Goa, a vast wall of laterite forms one side of the bank of the quietly flowing *Kushavati*. This laterite stone literally formed a stone canvas for primitive people to express their fears, uncertainties, and creativity in the face of adversities from the natural world. This stone canvas is full of engravings of animals like the humped bull, deer, peacock, dancing girl, and a strange labyrinth like design. All pointers to a distant animistic past.

A number of elements were used to create awesome visuals which were also attributed with magical qualities. The annual repetition of the amazing events left a lasting effect on the people. Through such events the collective mind traversed from a state of mere seeing, to a state of believing. The most striking example is the use of fire seen at the following ceremonies:

Firewalking at the annual festival (*zatra*) of Goddess *Shree Lairaee* at Shirgaon in Bicholim taluka. The huge inferno burns in front of the temple square until the early hours of morning. The faithful disciples (*dhond*) run through the strewn embers. The massive inferno is the focus of the festival.

Bhutanchi Mirounuk during the annual Dusserah festivities at Pernem in north Goa, one can still see the use of fire to call on the spirits. At the *Gadde* at Sal village in Bicholim taluka, and the *zagor* performances in Siolim village in north Goa, fire plays a major role. Both ceremonies are night long vigils in honour of the village guardian spirits (*devnchar*).



Roen : Termite Mount worshipped as the Mother Goddess Santeri.

We find a number of performances where gestures, colour and trance states, were adopted to create a reality and temporality removed from mundane life.

The ceremony that goes into the harvesting of the first sheaves of rice corn, and several eco-cultural festivals, such as *Mangem Thapnem* (crocodile worship), *Nag Panchami*, *Tulsi Lagin*, reflect the same process of the deification of nature on the one hand and innovative ways of gaining symbolic mastery over nature on the other.

The crescendo to all of folk wisdom and creativity in deifying nature and passing down ethnobotanical knowledge, can be seen in the

celebration of Ganesh Chathurti in Goa. This festival reflects the people's complete identification of natural vegetation with the divine. Bushan Bhave has captured the array of flora revered during Chathurti in his book '*Matoli*'. Goa has a unique tradition of displaying several seasonal fruits, useful as well as poisonous plants, in the form of a canopy (*matoli*) above the idol of Lord Ganapati. In a covert sort of way, this was a way to pay respects to mother nature as well as teach the youngsters about the flora around. Lessons in taxonomy!

These are some definite pointers that nature's fury and bounty has been the primordial stimulus for all our creativity. It is a fine example of early man's inferential thinking. The outcome of which has given rise to a myriad of artistic expressions.

From animism to fauvism, to haute couture, nature continues to fire human creativity.

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Dr. Bernadette Gomes has done her doctoral thesis on 'Ethno-medicine and healing practices amongst the Kunbi'. She has taught sociology at the Government College, Quepem and worked on reports on the status of the Gouly tribe and the first Scheduled tribe census in Goa. She has a keen interest in the subject of folk practices.