

Lost Communities

The ancient institution of community village life in Goa, India, known as *comunidade* (Portuguese for 'community'), plays an important role in fisheries regulation

The tiny Indian state of Goa (area: 3,701 sq km; coastline: 131 km; east-west breadth: 60 km) has a strong fishing community located along the coast and in the estuarine backwater basins. Fisheries are a dominant sector in Goa's economy and, along with tourism, is a major source of revenue for the state.

The 1960 Census for Goa, Daman and Diu enumerated 4,891 persons as fishermen and the total population dependent on fisheries was estimated at 14,000, located in 14 villages in the coastal areas of Bardez, Goa and Salcete. Traditional country canoes

In 1957, the Portuguese government had brought four mechanized trawlers and purse-seiners into Goa. As there was no separate Fisheries Department then, they were handed over to the Board of External Trade (Junta de Comercio Externo) so that locals could be trained in operating them but the vessels were damaged during military action and were pilfered.

According to the Goa government's Economic Survey for 2009-10, the annual fish catch in 2008 was 88,771 tonnes in the marine sector and 3,078 tonnes in the inland sector (up from 84,394 tonnes and 4,397 tonnes, respectively, in 2004, but down from a high of 103,087 tonnes and 4,194 tonnes, respectively, in 2005. See Table.)

Table: Annual Fish Catch (in tonnes)

Year	Marine	Inland
2004	84394	4397
2005	103087	4194
2006	96326	4131
2007	91185	3070
2008	88771	3078

Since ancient times, an institution of organizing community village life called *comunidade* (from the Portuguese for 'community') has existed in Goa. Locally, it is called *gaunkary* or *gaunponn*. The sui generis institution came into existence by its own volition, crafted by the first settlers much before the overlords or Rajas came on the scene.

Resources pooled

The early settlers pooled their resources to found villages with defined boundaries and each installed

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called *rampons*, made of wooden planks and outriggers have been traditionally used by the local Goan fishermen.

Eventually, mechanized trawlers made inroads in Goa's fishing industry. The financially challenged traditional fishermen were unable to shift to mechanized trawler fishing and so there were prolonged confrontations between the mechanized and traditional sectors. In the early 1980s Mathany Saldanha, a school teacher from Cansaulim, Salcete, took up the cause of the traditional fishermen under the banner of 'Ramponkarancha Ekvot' and continued to fight for the cause of ramponkars (traditional fishermen on *rampons*) even as a Minister in the Goa cabinet—until his death in early 2012.

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with a presiding deity or *gram-dev*. The founding fathers of these villages were called Gaunkars, and the absolute ownership of the village came to be vested with the *comunidade*. The *comunidade*, which is the primary owner of the village, creates titles for land by grants of assignment to individuals.

The *comunidades* are regulated by laws of custom and usage which were compiled for the first time in 1526 into a charter, and subsequently codified in 1904, 1933 and 1961. Land management is a duty of the *comunidade* and some lands are given on short- or long-term assignments, as escheat to the *comunidade*. Therefore, the *comunidade* villages are non-government villages or non-revenue villages.

Hence, to make a village a functional and economically viable unit, the founding fathers had a scheme. They invited the artisans of various trades, occupations or crafts to become village staff. They included temple priests, weavers, cobblers, ironsmiths and goldsmiths, washermen, carpenters, barbers, tailors, potters, doctors, fishermen and so on, as per the need of the village and the district. Necessary land for their habitation was earmarked and allotted to them for their homesteads as long as the person with his family stayed there and his children continued the trade. He was also allotted a parcel of field to cultivate rice for his own sustenance. The *comunidade* would pay remuneration for these services. This scheme was known as 'nomoxim' grants. When the head of the family died, he was replaced by another one with the reverted nomoxim conferred on the new incumbent. Besides these nomoxim grants, there were other usufructary assignments as well.

Fishermen, though they are not Gaunkars, are also included in the fabric of the *comunidades*, under the profession of '*tari*' or *pescador* which in Portuguese means 'fisherman'. Fishermen are important for Goans, the majority of whom are fish-eaters. The fishermen community in Goa is

a sub-caste of Hindus who converted to Christianity and continued the profession and they are called '*kharvi*' in Konkani.

Rui Gomes Pereira in his *Goa Vol.II: Gaunkari—the old village associations* records: "The corporation of the Passo de Ambarim (Ambarim wharf) was an institution of three *passos* (wharves) of fishermen that existed at Naroa, Santetem and Ambarim. Its members had the duties of providing seamen to His Majesty's Navy and performing service therein. In return, they had the right to fish in the rivers within its jurisdiction. They used to pay the national treasury (the Foro) 25 *tangas brancas*. In the second half of the 19th century, the community of Choraó seized its properties. However, in the year 1861, the government restored to the members their properties with the old obligation of rendering service to the Portuguese Navy, which had been suspended."

The *comunidades* used to maintain the river crossings that connected the roads on either side. Before the advent of mechanized ferry boats, rivers could be crossed only on dugout canoes, two of which were joined for greater stability and passenger capacity. These canoe ferries are known in Konkani as '*tar*' (hence, the term *tari* or for fishermen).

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Hector Fernandes at Quitula Casan. 'Casans' or 'khajans' lie below the high-tide level and are protected by levees known as "bunds" in the local Konkani language

Where *comunidades* exist, the ferry wharfs belong to them and the right to operate the canoe ferry for a year was auctioned by the *comunidade*. The ferry-man who won the right to operate the ferry could collect ferrying charges from travellers, except the Gaunkars who were to be ferried free in lieu of the auction money. The *taris* used to build huts near the wharves and stay there the whole year round, operating the ferries round the clock.

Apart from fishing in the rivers where the government has jurisdiction for issuing fishing rights, fishing is done in shallow tidal ponds and lakes where fishing rights are issued by the respective *comunidades* that own them. The *comunidades* have reclaimed the silted mud-flats to convert them into fertile fields by building levees or embankments locally called bunds. These vast tracks of low-lying fields called *casans* or *khajans* are below the high-tide level and are protected by the levees.

When these lands were reclaimed, the *comunidades* were actually creating what we today term 'special eco-fragile zones'. In the past, the brackish waters of the flood plains used to reach up to the hard-rock lateritic strata. Today, when there are breaches in the bunds, the water inundates the *casan* fields and makes the groundwater in the open-dug wells brackish and unpalatable. The reclamation of tidal mud-flats by construction of bunds has thus changed the ecological balance by preventing salt-water ingress into the groundwater.

The *casan* lands are not a mere stretch of flat, low-lying land but have an intricate system to take care of different natural events. Besides the levees or bunds, pathways were made so that even under situations of inundation, people could safely negotiate through the fields. There were also provisions for drainage to allow the runoff from hills and the upper reaches of the land to drain into the *poim* (a tidal brackishwater pond with an exit to the river) without causing undue flooding and water-logging of the fields,

which would have caused rice crops to rot.

The *poims* are also used for harvesting fish which is plentiful throughout the year. The right for catching the fish lies with the *comunidade* or with the owner of the particular *poim* and field. The right to catch fish is auctioned in two parts—the right to catch fish at the sluice gate and the right to catch in the *poim*. A funnel-shaped net is set up near the doors of the sluice-gate during the outflow of water when the sluice gates are opened. The fish that is expelled with this outflow is caught in the net. In larger *poims*, fishing rights are also auctioned separately with the condition that Gaunkars can also fish for personal consumption. However, each *comunidade* has its own regulations and outsiders have now begun bidding at auctions and fishing in the *poims*.

The changes in the demographic profile of Goa started over a century ago when the locals started migrating to foreign countries for better jobs and the local vacuum was filled by in-migration from neighbouring villages and states. In December 1964 a new law was created, The Goa, Daman and Diu Agricultural Tenancy Act and in June 1965, this Act was insidiously made applicable to the *comunidades*, thereby passing all community lands into private hands. The functioning of the *comunidades* was crippled and they began to lose revenues. Today, vast tracts of *casan* fields of the *comunidades* are lying fallow and uncultivated as the past tenants have either died or moved away. 3

For more

goaprintingpress.gov.in/uploads/Code%20of%20Comunidade.pdf

Code of Comunidades. 1961

saligaoserenade.com/2010/04/comunidades-de-go/

Comunidades of Goa

sites.google.com/site/comunidadesofgoa/
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