Tradition, Continuity & Change
Goan Society in Transition(s)

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Of mud, stone, tile and more: The re-making of the Casa Portuguesa in Goa

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The present research has been inspired by a stray conversation overheard by the researcher during her daily bus commute. En route a school-boy proudly points out a beautiful Goan house to his fellow class-mate and presents it as a "Portuguese House".

When man quit his wandering ways and pitched tent in a corner of the earth, he invented the house. In the course of time, the dwelling space swelled up to encompass much more than the four corners. It defined his very being. In Goa too, just as elsewhere the house is more than just a house. Unlike elsewhere, it is a *ghor* and a *casa-* words that have over centuries taken on myriad and multiple meanings.

Akin to a time-machine, this research visits the houses of our past before resurfacing in modern homes. The Portuguese-ness of the houses that constitute the Goan landscape is taken up for discussion. This essay examines the physical building of the Goan dwelling place as well as its transformation over time into an entity that moves beyond structural spaces into domains of the mind   and the heart. In a deviation from the general viewpoint, we question the oppositions that seem inbuilt in the binaries of tradition and modernity. We contend that the domestic architectural landscape in Goa has been marked by its chequered history in an original fashion that considers tradition as ever-evolving and modernity as ever-rooted in the past.

The word "tradition" comes from the Latin verb *trado-transdo*, which means *to pass on to another, to transmit, to hand over.* Consequently, the conservative connotation that tradition calls

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to mind was originally completed by the notion of transmitting. Tradition is thus aptly perceived as a double process of preserving and transmitting. However, this task does not exclude change. *Modern* is consequently no other than *Tradition* at the moment of its birth. Tradition and modernity need not be treated as binary opposites but as ongoing links in the chain of time (Queysanne, 1989). It is ignorance that prompts us to term the unknown buried deep within the sands of time as traditional and posit it in opposition to the ever familiar modern. We often interpret the Subject as modern and the foreign Other as traditional. As an illustration we draw upon European architectural sensibilities of the past centuries. With the advent of the Renaissance the European artists deemed the past Gothic creations as barbarian and distastefully inspired from the natural wildness of the Northern Alps. The Gothic cathedrals appeared to Classical eyes as monstrous mushrooms sprouting from the soil and brazenly reaching up to the heavens. The Renaissance men considered themselves more civilised, having reconnected with their Graeco-Roman roots and having set up as their Muse "the Good Nature" in their quest for Classical perfection.

Over the centuries, Goa too witnessed similar changes in the identification of what constitutes the modern and the traditional. Pre-colonial contact, the Goan elite architectural expression was centred on the Tulsi1 in the Hindu courtyard house. Following Western exchange, the focal point gradually moved frontwards. Gods now set up camp in the *entrada* of the House. This is just one of the spatial transformations that modernization brought in its wake. Yet paradoxically, by the 19th century the internal disposition again drew inspiration from the traditional Hindu house. Although largely viewed as traditional, we contend that this 'angan' concept may have once upon a time been reckoned as modern in the ancient pre-Portuguese era since it was, in fact, an import from the technologically advanced Aryans.

The origins of the central courtyard architecture may be traced to 7,000 B.C. to the Indus valley Harappan and Mohenjo-Daro civilisation. It has stood the test of time and till date is a popular and practical option in arid regions world-wide. The model spread

to Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, Iran and China, Spain and onto the Americas… The courtyard house captures sunlight and outdoor space and makes it the very heart of the house. The angan harmoniously ordered the other spaces in the Indian social system characterised by flexibility and adaptability.

This innovation in architectural form was well adapted to India's climate as well as to the requirements of the joint-family and moved to Goa with the Saraswat Brahmins. The Goan traditional Hindu house is built with the *Angan* and the *Tulsi Vrindavan* as its sacred core. The older houses were usually single storied and had small narrow windows generally barred with wooden posts and plain shutters. Foreign travellers to Goa have described in their writings, traditional Hindu houses with their large courtyards filled with ornamental plants and their rear gardens brimming with fruit-bearing plants. In later times, with the presence of Portuguese friars, the fruit-bearing plants moved frontwards to facilitate inspection by the knowledgeable Jesuits who experimented successfully with grafting mango-varieties. In present-day Goa, the courtyard is often remodelled to suit contemporary aesthetics and sensibilities, whilst drawing inspiration primarily from the Ancient Aryan model.

Architect Trupti Naik presents a house she designed keeping in mind traditional Hindu architectural values whilst adapting to contemporary requirements in a marriage between the traditional and the modern. Drawing inspiration from the Goan 'angan' concept, the novel structure has as its focal point the 'Tulsi' court which appears here in a new avatar marking the entrance rather than in the guise of an inner courtyard. The 'Padvi' or 'sopo' (entrance seat) functioned as a transition space connecting the inside and the outside spaces. The column element around the courtyard and the 'Padvi' were prominent in the traditional designs. In the architect's modern reworking of the ancient, 'Tulsi' and 'Padvi' with an imposing traditional column of local laterite stone blend together, the column doubles up as a light source-'Deepstambha'.

Furthermore, in a departure from the traditional inner courtyard, the spatial arrangement in this case gives out onto the external space by virtue of a wide veranda overlooking the treetops. The traditional

courtyard house layout had its socializing spaces prominently laid around the central courtyard whereas the private spaces were discreetly positioned. In this contemporary design, it is the surrounding sloping terrain that has been used to achieve a similar effect. The public spaces (praying, music room, living, dining and kitchen) are placed at a higher level providing better lighting and cross ventilation while the private bedrooms are situated at the lower level thus giving the inmates the needed privacy and restful ambience heightened through diffused light and lower temperature. In keeping with hierarchical requirements, the prayer room is positioned at the highest level looking down on all other spaces. It has a glass ceiling which filters the natural light directly lighting up the deity.

Thus the traditional Hindu courtyard house continues to exert its influence in modern times. It was however itself viewed as being modern in a certain day and age. The caves at Rivona pre-date the courtyard house. The dwelling-places of the folk people in Goa also go way back in time. These simple residences were close to nature and biodegradable. Cow dung was used profusely in the flooring of the houses, a practice that continues till date. Traditional and modern elements are thus interwoven in Goan houses; the very notions of traditional and modern are equally subject to the forces of time.

Rhum (1996) explains that the categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity' are fundamentally ideological constructs that serve the interests of the powerful who wish either to maintain or transform society in ways concordant with their interests. In its older construction, tradition affirms 'this is the right way to do things'. In a fresher context, 'tradition' is opposed to 'modernity', as ' our way to do things' while modernity takes on the connotation of 'the improved way to do things'. The seal of approval on the 'right way' is thus no longer a certain ancientness but a fine fusion between the authentic us-ness of 'culture' and the attraction of the brand-new, latest and supposedly advanced- adjectives which have often embodied the achievements of an idealized West. While Tradition is often local and inborn, the Modern usually comes from an advanced topography. When it travelled from the West to various other parts

of the globe, 'modernization' as a product was exported and in turn imported with great zeal by Eastern elites. In the ensuing transfer, there was transformation.

Although Rhum argues in the Thai context, his views throw light on the Goan scenario. Indigenous, traditional, and the once-upon-a- time modern houses underwent perceptual change and continually evolved in keeping with the forces of history, firmly propelled in this case by the Portuguese sailors turned settlers. Portugal marked the facades of the Goan house in indelible shades of white, indigo and ochre. The *Ghor* was rechristened *Casa* but not before undergoing a process of deep conversion. However just as with all cultural imports into Goa, the *new* merely remoulded with the *old*, producing fusions bearing only a slight resemblance to the models they were meant to emulate. The traditional never went out of fashion but retransformed itself to suit the modern tastes of the time. Goan architect Gerald da Cunha has a similar perspective "When the Portuguese colonized Goa, they brought in their own architectural designs and lifestyle to influence the already strong culture and architecture that prevailed here. As a result of the amalgamation, an entirely new thing emerged. What you see in Goan houses, you don't see in Portugal, or elsewhere in the world… Goans, who were people who were converted, were looking for a new identity, and thus embarked on the experiment in architecture, to produce something unique and unseen anywhere in the world".

The houses in the City of Goa dating to the early Portuguese period (16th-17th centuries) have all vanished in time, with the exception of the Souto Maior palace. The lavish interiors and the elaborate mannerisms that accompanied the reception of visitors can only be recreated in the mind's eye. Travellers' accounts do however provide a glimpse into these beautiful houses. Pyrard de laval, French traveller to Goa in the early 17th century, describes in particular detail the windows made of shells of oysters and sea snails that today dot the Goan touristic landscape. Windows inlaid with nacre or mother-of-pearl shells have become so synonymous with Goa that they adorn ancient as well as new constructions. They come in all sizes- as miniature versions to be picked up as

souvenirs and artefacts by tourists or larger than life as backdrops in commercial establishments. *The use of the carepas, as they were known* then, was motivated by the need to illuminate and at the same time preserve the interiors of the house where social events could take place during the day. *Carepas* came to replace the system of wooden shutters and balusters which was very common in the early period (Silveira, 2008).

The windows of Goa testify to the ingenuity of the Goan craftsmen who used *carepas* as a cheaper and more pleasant substitution to the fabric curtains that had come to embody stylish interiors with the arrival of the Europeans. The flourishing trade of the time had opened up markets to newer products, which soon embellished the recently-built Portuguese houses. The increasing use of silk and other fine fabrics for display meant that houses were to become highly ornamental in the years to come. Yet for the moment, the exterior of a Portuguese house in Goa conserved an austere and functional façade inspired from the then prevailing building style in Portugal, profoundly marked in turn by the Italian Mannerist. The solidity and sombreness of the houses built by the Portuguese *fidalgos* is understandable given the focus on the building of forts and of religious structures. Facades were double-storied and windows were simple, those on the ground floor even simpler as they were destined for service personnel in the andar nobile setup.6 later, in the 18th century this functional look even found its way into the Palace of the King of Sundem in Ponda.

In the rest of Goa though, by the 18th century, residential architecture had evolved greatly to accommodate expressions of Goan identity which saw an upswing in the wake of the declining Portuguese fortunes and prestige. Goans contested Portuguese hegemony in the Indian Ocean from Macao to Mozambique and made a case for their equality through distinct cultural expressions. The reassertion of Goans was not however bereft of influence from the Iberian pensinsula. In *Houses of Goa* (1999), Pandit and Mascarenhas offer valuable insights into Goan architectural features. They elucidate that Portuguese secular architecture was by now characterised by three types of mansions- the *Casa torre*

(tower house); the *Casa que integra a capela na fachada* (the house with the chapel integrated), the *Casa comprida* (the low elongated house). The latter two are echoed in Goan architecture. The interiors of the 18th century houses in Portugal were Baroque and later Rococo in style. The extravagant richness of the Baroque and the light-hearted curvy lines of the Rococo style are visible in Goa to this day. The interiors of a traditional Indo-Portuguese house today allude to these amorous encounters between the West and the East in an attempt towards perceived modernisation. The Portuguese focussed on the facades and their embellishments. The single storied façade of the ancient courtyard house, the double storied façade of Portuguese inspiration, the façade with the chapel integrated all coexist harmoniously in Goa. The front planar facades with an emphasis on the top storey through the use of gables, finials and ornate windows, the vertical and horizontal division of the façade with mouldings and pilasters are reflected from Portugal onto Goan soil. The *Casa sobrada* (double-storied house) continued to follow the *andar nobile* disposition in imitation of its Portuguese counterpart and as a status symbol. Thus, the first floor windows had a balcony and cast-iron or wood railing with elaborate Baroque or Rococo window mouldings and the ground-floor windows were nondescript square openings.

The 18th century Goan landlord was wealthy; trade with British-India, land rewards in exchange for exceptional service in the Portuguese government, acceptance of Christianity all contributed to Goa's unique hybrid cultural style, popularly labelled as Indo-Portuguese. In *Whitewash, Red Stone* (2011), Varela Gomes contests the popular perception surrounding the Goan houses "… the houses built in Goa…in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries constitute an extraordinarily coherent and distinct current in the panorama of housing around the world. These houses are now being named 'Portuguese Houses' perhaps because of the influence of tourism since 'Portuguese' is a more exotic denomination than Goan… There is no need to point out that houses such as those in Goa exist nowhere in any town or village in Portugal, Brazil, or Portuguese-influenced Africa. They are solely Goan.

The single storied house common in Goan residential architecture may be termed an offspring of the traditional Hindu courtyard house with some foreign influence- pilasters, mouldings, cornices, painted white. In the course of time, it absorbed some height from the Portuguese *casa sobrada* to evolve into a *meio sobrado* or half storied house form. Houses perched atop a heightened plinth with a *balcão* at the entry point dot the Goan countryside today. In this case though the *balcão* is hardly a balcony, it could better be described as a colonnaded porch with inbuilt seats. The curvation of the entrance steps attests to a Baroque influence. In an adaptation from a bygone era's princely court with the ascending staircase, this house also bears resemblance to the Hindu courtyard house in its openness to the exterior. The semi- public space would serve a social function allowing for manifestation of hierarchical positions and relational proximity. In time the *balcão* has acquired the status of a perfect setting for an informal and convivial tea with neighbours and friends. The *balcão* has over the years taken on a double storied porch- a feature dating back to the military architecture style which marked the initial part of the Portuguese era. In response to Goa's warm climatic conditions it has also extended horizontally via the veranda that often runs all along the front and even the sides of the Goan house.

Stepping back from the *balcão*, the sight of a miniature gate-house may come across as surprising. The concept of fortifying walls and an entry-point through a gate-house originated in Medieval Europe. Although unnecessary in Goan conditions, decorated gate-posts and elegant doorways cut through the monotony of long and elaborate compound walls to announce indigenous architectural skills. Hindu motifs dating back to the Kadamba age (lions, porcupines) coexist with supposedly modern Western figures (swans, ball finials). The betel-leaf pattern featuring on certain eavesboards has also travelled from Hindu ancestry into the Indo-Portuguese house. Other eavesboards come replete with curvilinear Rococo style patterns and are more in keeping with Western aesthetics.

If ochre and black dominated the colour palette in ancient ages, dramatic shades come together to form the leitmotif of

Indo-Portuguese houses seen today. Indigo, ochre, red, green, are interspersed with the immaculate white that flanks doors and windows. The smattering of white goes back to an era which reserved this revered colour for religious buildings and permitted only a fraction of white for temporal uses. White and blue reflect the seas of Goa and come together in the popular *Azulejo* artefacts that are found in Goan homes and today bought by tourists. The modern rendition of the iconic ceramic tile-work draws from Goa's earlier connection with Macao; however research into the deeper recesses of the *Azulejo* throws up multi-coloured hues coming from Portugal, via its historical links to Spain and eventually to the Arab world. In today's commercial reworking of the age-old tiles, a much wider colour palette is used to attract and to sell the tiles of Goa depicting typical and caricatural scenes of Goa.

In Goa, Portugal sells till date. In this land which has no Portuguese houses, only locally made Goan ones boasting of European and Oriental influence, are advertised as Portuguese houses for sale. Goan architect Raya Shankwalkar sheds light on the situation "Ill-informed brokers have coined the term, which reflects a deeply ignorant conception of the complex, multi-layered evolution of architecture in Goa. It is wrong, even offensively wrong, and it is extremely irritating to see the term actually gain popularity instead of being discarded. The use of local materials, crafts and skills make the Western-influenced Goan house a unique architectural expression."

The Indo-Portuguese house has by now been refashioned and comes with a hefty price tag. New owners revel in their exotic dwellings, older ones bemoan the rising costs of maintaining an old Indo-Portuguese house. In this day and age, town dwellers look to modern apartments, country residents take pride in brand-new bungalows. Real Estate companies like Sun Estates design and sell a mix of the old and new. They woo potential customers with their offer of a modern habitat along with traditional Goan architecture. "Goan architecture is defined by traditional courtyards, streets, shaded windows, balconies, and verandahs. While staying true to

the essence of Goan architecture, we have over the past two decades successfully reinterpreted it in a modern way".

The restoration and conversion of old heritage houses is in vogue in modern-day Goa. The Portuguese (or Indo-Portuguese) character is ever changing, in an ongoing attempt to adapt to current requirements. Architect Chandan Parab asserts that "Goan houses have evolved from Portuguese influence which is mere 30-40%. Portugal being a cold European country, we don't get to see the spacious verandahs and the balcaos as we do here in Goa. The kind of material used like the Azulejo tiles, the white plaster bands on the windows is what we have got from Portugal. What we see here in Goa is a fusion of Goan European style of architecture where the Goan traditional form is predominant"

Over time, the houses of Goa have evolved and are incorporating new elements or reworking old ones in more modern aesthetic sensibilities. They come in multiple forms- the residential house, the commercial guest-house, the fancy boutique, the luxurious hotel or the traditional Goan restaurant. Whatever be the product, the ambiance serves as a propelling selling force. In all such endeavours, the affinity towards the Casa is but a business venture. But for the traditional Goan homeowner and the neo-Goan proprietor, his house is a matter of the heart.

The Goan House has inspired architects as well as artists from Goa and abroad. The researcher provides one such illustration by referring to the body of work of Japanese artist Akeru Barros Pereira who celebrates in her every sketch the charm of the Indo-Portuguese house that she has come to adore. The *Casa* and the *Ghor* in Goa is not merely lived in; it is dreamt of, built with loving care (following in some cases years of work abroad), in others inherited and tenderly conserved, or at times bought with much enthusiasm. It is in most instances treasured if not for sentimental reasons, for its commercial value. However it has met in modern times its fair share of troubles from competing dwelling spaces that have come to characterise urban pockets of scenery in a fast evolving Goa.

Tradition and modernity come together as the stones in the interlocking pavement that forms the solid matrix of the Goan

House. In a Goa that is trampled upon (even bulldozed) by the concrete wheels of time, we may as does Akeru Barros Pereira7 reimagine and paint the rundown houses intact as they existed in the past or be inspired by the likes of Trupti Naik and open wide our doors to contemporary winds of change. The past even when considered pre-historic prevails, ever-relevant in some form or the other. We never really re-invent the wheel, we merely refurbish it!

1   ''I've come across different houses, cute little ones and even rundown ones; the latter I have painted unbroken. Some pretty houses have disappeared after I've sketched them. When I see old houses, I feel the feelings of the Great Goan masons and carpenters who created them and the people who lived in them. I feel the joy and tears. That is what I try to capture in my drawings and paintings"- Akeru Barros Pereira.

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