

## *Gender Dynamics and the Sacred Space of Goa*

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### **Abstract**

Goa, an idyllic state on the West coast of India is dotted with Hindu temples that were created in the ancient times by the village communities popularly known as the Gãonkaris. The primacy of the Mother Goddess in the ritual worship is a clear indication that the local community was following the Fertility Cult. This theory is accentuated by the existence of numerous temples dedicated to the Father God worshipped in the form of Linga, the phallic symbol. In the olden times the Gãonkaris managed these temples. Subsequently, control of these key cultural symbols was monopolized by the higher castes, which enabled them to perpetuate caste and gender discriminations. The immense wealth of these temples and their recalcitrant attitude towards the colonial masters drove the Portuguese to clamp government control on these temples by passing the Regulamento das Mazania in 1886, which no doubt, regularized their administration but failed to touch upon the discriminatory practices followed by the traditional temple managers. This paper is an attempt to analyse the factors that permitted these temples to be the avenues of exploitation and abuse of the weaker sex in the name of religion. The rigidity, with which they control the gender systems in the local society even in the modern times, is indeed a perplexing issue!

**Keywords:** Temple, Linga, Gãonkari, Regulamento, Gender, Discrimination

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## **Introduction**

The religious cults that are followed in Goa by the Hindus are rooted in the popular psyche and as such they dominate the social life of the people. Sateri, the universally venerated local mother goddess, which forms the principal component of the paradigm of 'the Kshetra and the Kshetrapal' (Joshi, 1995), has been the creation of the ancient farming community that originally settled in this part of the peninsula, which is represented by the Kulmis and the Gaudes. The other constituent was created by the pastoral community, which followed a few centuries later (Kosambi, 1962). The Gaud Saraswat Brahmins who arrived much later (Talmaki, 1932), ushered in a sea change in the cultic manifestation due to the process of evolution, that they systematically initiated in order to naturalise themselves in the locality of their migration in the early days and subsequently to ascertain their control on the local religious symbols that they had adopted recently for gratifying their spiritual needs. The transition was effected smoothly owing to the fact that by then, they had not only gained control over the local administration by ascending the echelons of power within the village community, but also by contributing scriptures that authenticated their proprietary claims to the local cults. The techniques that they devised in order to gear up the whole process enabled them to indulge in kind of a social engineering. The speed with which they uprooted the matrilineal antiquity and transplanted the patrilineal traditions is indeed amazing.

## **Research Questions**

The aim of the study was to explore the status of the women visa-a-vi the village temple and the society in the larger perspective. The questions that were addressed were:

- a. Are the women given an opportunity to participate in the temple administration?
- b. What is their participation in the conduct of ritual worship performed in the temple?
- c. How much is their contribution as members of the servant community attached to the temple?
- d. What is the antiquity of the Devadasi system in Goa and how it has contributed to the debasement of society at large?
- e. What changes have come owing to the new legislations that out-lawed the practise of Devadasi system?
- f. Has there come any real change in the gender dynamics in present-day scenario?

## **Methodology**

Yin's (2003) guidelines have been followed in choosing the case study research design, as it is suitable to answer exploratory research questions, where the investigator has no control over behavioral events and the focus of the study is contemporary. Multiple holistic case study design was utilized since different cases may have slightly different contexts and literal replication in such cases would improve the external validity of the study (Yin, 2003). The unit of analysis was a single temple. Nine temples the Ponda taluka of the state of Goa were chosen for literal replication, i.e. provide similar results as suggested by Yin (2003). Primary

data was obtained from the Private Statutes and Annual Budget Statements of the respective temples and the Comunidade Records housed in the Historical Archives of Goa at Panaji (henceforth referred as HAG) and the oral sources were tapped by interviewing the traditional temple managers, the local residents, the only surviving Devadasi attached to the Temple of Mahalasa at Mardol and the author herself has personally observed certain questionable practices followed in the tenth temple. Secondary data is collected from the Regulamento das Mazania the act that governs all the temples of Goa, the locally created temple chronicles popularly known as the Sthalapuranas and the scholarly writings of the modern day researchers.

## **Literature Review**

The primary sources that speak volumes about the system of temple administration prevailing for several centuries happen to be the Compromissos or the private statutes of the temple of Mahalasa at Mardol (henceforth mentioned as Compromisso 1), temple of Mangesh at Mangeshi (referred as Compromisso 2), Temple of Nagesh (ref. as Compromisso 3) and that of Mahalaxmi at Bandora (ref. as Compromisso 4), temple of Shantadurga at Cuncoliem (ref. as Compromisso 5) and temple of Shantadurga at Kavle (ref. as Compromisso 6), temple of Kapileshwar at Kapileshwari (ref. as Compromisso 7), temple of Devaki-Krishna at Marcel (ref. as Compromisso 8) and temple of Navadurga at Madkai (ref. as Compromisso 9). These statutes mention the names of clans that have proprietary rights to these temples, their duties and obligations towards the temple. They also specify the cadres of servants and also the service conditions that they have to comply with. A separate section in every Compromisso also specifies the punitive measures that can be taken against the erring servants. These statutes give us an idea about who can perform or sponsor the ritual ceremonies of the temple. The Sthalapuranas render history of individual temples briefly, and also inform about the renovations or rebuilding activity undertaken by these temples in recent times making allusions to the chief sponsors and major donors whose prime aim was to acquire spiritual merit. The Annual Budget Statements of these temples submitted to the Mamlatdar of the Taluka specify the sources of income and heads of expenditure for each temple. The Comunidade records written either in Portuguese or in Modi script of Marathi language illuminate us about the village properties that were assigned to the temple and annual monetary contributions every village community made towards the temple and its servants.

The 'Regulamento das Mazania' was passed in 1886 by the Portuguese colonial Govt. and was revised in 1933. After liberation, the act has been modified several times, but still very much in operation and better known in recent times as the Devasthan Regulation, which serves as the indispensable secondary source for the study. The prime motive behind passing this act was to regularise and systematise the temple administration in Goa through the supervisory agency of the Mamlatdar in capacity as the Administrator of Temples in every taluka. The act contains 437 articles and actually provides the framework within which the Compromissos of individual temples had to be drafted and meticulously adhered to with respect to the governance of each temple. Compilations of Jesuit documents in Portuguese edited by Joseph Wicki and Francisco Silva Rego too are very helpful in tracing the historical references to the temples of Goa.

Goan temples have been investigated through different angles by the modern-day

scholars, both Indian and western. The process of evolution with respect to the different local cults has been the focus of many scholars (Prabhudessai, 2005; Dhere, 1961; Sharma, 1950; Kamat, 2013a). The economic profile of Goan temples has been probed thoroughly (Kamat, 2013b; Kamat, 2013c) to ascertain their contributions to the vibrancy of local economy. The paradigm of the *Kshetra* and the *Kshetrapala* that alludes to the primacy of the cult of mother goddess in context of local worship has been investigated deeply (Joshi, 1995; Dhere, 1978; Khedekar, 1968). Ritualistic practices specific to the folk cults have been widely discussed (Nayak, 2004; Kamat, 2011). Mythology and legendry wrapped around the temples have been analysed with a view to probe the original identity of the cults (Kamat, 2014a; Kamat 2014b). Special attention has been devoted to them with regard to their role in bringing about cultural resurgence in the state (Kamat, 2012). Many western scholars too have devoted their attention to these temples as centres of local resistance to the colonial hegemony (Axelrod and Fuerch, 1996). The Hindu-Catholic syncretism existing in Goa has been duly explored at length (Iffeka, 1985; Henn, 2014) and temple festivals of Goa have also been analysed (Newman, 2001). A host of the oral sources are also interviewed for this study to gain a deeper insight into the managerial and ritualistic practices followed at the different temples. A careful scrutiny of all these sources is aimed at tracing the complexity of the gender dynamics with respect to the sacred space of Goa.

## Findings

The *Compromisso* of every temple in Goa provide the guidelines according to which the temple has to be governed and the failure of which may permit the Administrator of the Temples of the respective talukas to warn the said Management Committee to mend its ways and in the extreme case of negligence of duties or mismanagement or blatant disregard shown to the Devasthan Regulation (henceforth mentioned as D. R.), he can invoke his punitive powers to even dismiss the erring team of managers (D. R. Article 59) Under such conditions he can order the re-election for the committee and in dire situations, he can put the temple under his own care for some time till normalcy is ushered in all over again.

Since the *Compromissos* had to be drafted within the framework of the *Regulamento das mazania*, many features pertaining commitment of the Mahajans towards the Regulation, the obligations of the Mahajans and the servants, and the general and the penal provisions are common to all these documents. Mahajans of every temple had to declare themselves as bound by the *Compromisso* and the *Regulamento* pertaining to the temples, by all the laws in force and those to be promulgated in future, in the administration of a particular temple (*Compromisso* 3, Article 47).

The founder members of each temple are described as *Mahajans*, and their rights are hereditary, perpetual and transmitted down the generations to the legitimate male descendants and to the sons adopted in accordance with the provisions of the Decree of December 16, 1880, which governs the usages and customs of the Hindus of Goa. The catalogue of the names of the *Mahajans* is appended to the Byelaws in each case. Apart from the above descendants, there may be many more descendants of the founder members presently staying in other parts of India. They too enjoy equal rights along with the local *Mahajans*, but they cannot be included in the managing committee. The catalogue of *Mahajans* is to be updated every year. In case the

descendant of a *Mahajan* whose name does not feature in the catalogue, but attends the annual General Body meeting and his identity is confirmed, he can be given the right to vote (Dhume, 1971).

In accordance with the guidelines of the Regulamento, the Compromisso of Mahalasa executed in 1911 permits 18 years old sons of founders to acquire the status of full Mahajan (Kamat, 2014). The same condition holds good for the temple of Mangesh (Compromisso 2, 1909), Shantadurga of Cuncolliem (Compromisso 5, 1909; Kunkalyekar, 2010), Kapileshwar (Compromisso 7, 1909), Devaki-Krishna (Compromisso 8, 1910) and that of Navadurga (Compromisso 9, 1910) respectively. The Compromisso of Nagesh includes the married sons of the Mahajans above 18 years of age and unmarried sons above 21 years, in the catalogue of Mahajans (Compromisso 3, 1910), while the temple of Mahalaxmi increases the age limit to 23 years for the bachelor sons for the purpose (Dhume, 1976).

With respect to all the temples selected for investigation, the proprietary rights are bestowed upon the Saraswat Brahmins except for the temple of Kapileshwar, where Mahajans are drawn from the Padye Brahmins. Entry into the sanctum sanctorum of most of the temples is limited to the people of the *Brahmin* caste for ritual worship like giving morning ablutions to the deity, which is clearly mentioned in the statutes of Devaki-Krishna (Compromisso 8, Article 50). However the wives of the Mahajans can accompany their husbands, for the ceremony of ablutions on certain auspicious days or in order to fulfil a vow. This practice is followed in the temples of Mangesh, Nagesh and that of Shantadurga at Kavle, while they are not entitled to the said right in rest of the temples under study. The temple of Mahalasa happens to be an exception as it permits only the temple priests to perform rituals in the sanctuary especially post-Nakul Gurav episode, which entailed a protracted legal battle between the temple and one of its employees that threatened the rights of the hereditary temple managers (Kamat, 2011). However ladies are permitted to participate in ritual ceremonies that are conducted in the Bhogamandapa or chauka, which is the sacred space within the temple. A closer look on the flow of devotees in all these temples allows us the inference that a wide section of women offer prayers and authorise ritual ceremonies to be performed on their behalf by the temple priests, by making payments specified by the temple administration.

Chapter IV of the Compromisso of the temple of Shantadurga at Kavle, which happens to be one of the richest temples of the state, speaks of the arrangement made to fund the festivals and ceremonies that are performed in the temple. It refers to the names of two ladies, Krishnabai Kausarkodkar from Canara in Karnataka as the sponsor of the palanquin procession of the first fortnight of the Hindu month of Falgun, and Umabai Borkar of Ankola, as the bearer of the expenditure of the ceremony called the Fulvide Panchami in the second fortnight of the month of Vaishakha (Compromisso 6, 1909). The annual budget for the year 2010-11 of the temple of Shantadurga at Kavle is appended with a list of sponsors of temple ceremonies and it contains names of numerous women from within the state and also from the other states of the Indian union.

According to Wagle, the temple of Nagesh was a small shrine a few centuries ago. Mr. Narayan Fonde Kamat from Kumbharjua was managing the temple affairs for quite some time. After his sad demise and death of the other male members of the

family, his widow and his daughter-in-law (Wagle fails to mention their first names) through their agent, Mr. Vadiye from Kumbharjua, began to take care of the temple. These ladies built the existing temple in 1780 A. D. Building of the rest houses, *agrashalas*, within the precincts of the temple of Nagesh were partly funded by the widow of Narayan Fonde Kamat in 1781, and all the *agrashalas* were renovated by Gopikabai, the widow of Pandurang Kamat Panvelkar in 1877. He also mentions that Indirabai Bhatkar from Panaji was one of the cash donors to the temple in 1913 (Wagle, 1913).

All the *Compromissos* perused for this study, inform as to who were enlisted as the temple servants at each temple and what were their service conditions. Every temple employed ladies who were summarily described as the *devadasis*. A *devadasi* was a young girl dedicated to the god by way of a token marriage ceremony locally called as *shensvidhi*. They were not supposed to marry a man, but were permitted to be in relationship with a man and wealthy men took it as a symbol of prestige to befriend with a *devadasi*, whom the Portuguese called, the *bailaderas*. There were different categories with respect to their duties in the temple. Those trained in classical singing and dancing were called *kalavants*, while those who maintained the temple and its precincts clean, helped in assisting in keeping tidy the equipment used in the different ritual ceremonies, and tended to the oil lamps in the temple, were called *bhavins*. There were also other groups of lesser importance to the temple, but belonging to the fold of the *devadasi*, like the *chedvan*, *bandis* etc. All such women practised the matrilineal system. Every *comunidade* or the individual temple in later times, had assigned to the temple woman a house in the vicinity of the temple and a landed property described as *namas*, whose income they could use for their upkeep. But all such properties lapsed to the temple once the services were discontinued. Almost all *comunidades* of Ponda contributed towards the annual pension called *vatan*, for the *bhavins*. The similarity between the *namas* and the *vatan* was that, both could be enjoyed as long as the grantee rendered services to the temple (Gomes Pereira, 1981). As the handmaidens of god, the *devdasis* had a separate legal status and were exempted from enrolment and licensing system imposed by the Portuguese (Cabral e Sa, 1990).

Earliest written reference to the temple women is found with respect to the temple of Mahalasa at Verna. There were a lot of ladies attached to this temple. The Portuguese sources have called them 'religious women' and 'public women' who were ready to commit sin with any stranger who visited them (Wicki, 1962; Silva Rego, 1953). The said temple was destroyed in 1567 Diogo Fernandes, the Captain of the Fort of Rachol (Priolkar, 2008). The *Panchanama* report prepared by the colonial authorities a year later is entered in to the Revenue Register maintained in HAG at Panaji. It mentions that the *gaonkars*, the villager elders, had to pay 4 *barganis* to the woman who lit the lamps for the ceremony of *artis*, which was one of the duties of the *devadasis*, while 12 *tangas bancas* were paid to the woman who (may not be of the said caste) supplied flowers to the temple every year (Foral, 1568). The Articles 31-32 of the Statutes of the relocated temple of Mahalasa at Mardol in Ponda taluka specifies that the *kalavants* had to offer the song and dance recital in the *chawk* at night and after the ceremony of *arti* and accompany all the processions offering their customary services. The *bhavins* had to offer her services with the *chawri*, flywhisk at the time of *arti* and other ceremonies along with other duties assigned to her. They also prepared the *agrashala* for *samaradhana*, the community lunch and cleaned the

cooking pots on such days (Compromisso 1, 1011). Some of the devadasis attached to the temple sponsored the feasts of goddess Sateri, the affiliate deity of Mahalasa (Bhat, 2010). The Lalakhi-Sukhasan procession of the annual festival of Mahalasa was sponsored by a devadasi, Nabu Katkar from Bandora (Katkar, 2007). Wagle mentions that several devadasis made donations to the Vishnuyaga sacrifice conducted in the temple in 1913. Only Shrimati Mardolkar and Bhiki Mardolkar have been contributing services of the kalavant and bhavin respectively to temple in recent times. The Budget of the temple for 1910-11 mentions the name of Savitri Sazu Naik as the quit rent payer to the temple in connection with the temple property that she occupies (Mahalasa Temple Budget, 2010).

The Panchanama report of the temple of Mangesh mentions that the gaonkars had to contribute every year, 48 *tangas brancas* to the temple out of which, 33 *Tangas brancas* were paid to the ladies who performed dance in the temple and 15 *tangas brancas* to the temple singers. Article 16 of the Comromisso says that all objects acquired from offerings from the devotees had to be divided into five equal parts out of which one part was given to the kalavant. Article 26 of the said document divulges that there were eight families of devdasis and one bhavin attached to the temple. There are no devadasis attached to this temple in the present times. They used hire the services of the devadasis from Mardol and other places in the recent times.

With respect to the temple of Nagesh, it does not have anyone to discharge the duties of bhavin and the kalavants at present. Same is the case with the temple of Kapileshwar (Bakhale, 2010) and Shantadurga at Cuncolem (Devidas, 2010) but it is evident from the Comunidade records, that the latter temple had assigned tax-free properties, gharbhat namashi to the bhavin (*Livros da comunidade de Cuncolem*, Vol. IV).

The Chapter V of the temple of Navadurga of Madkai refers to four families of kalavantis that were attached to the temple. All women were prohibited from entering the sanctuary, while those of the Vaishya and Shudras caste, from even sitting in the room near the bedchamber of the deity. At present the kalavantis are hired from Bhoma and Canacona at the time of annual festival of the temple (Kamat, 2011).

The Article 16 of the temple of Shantadurga at Kavle mentions that 19 families of kalavants were residing in 10 houses in the vicinity of the temple that catered to the needs of the temple. It also engaged one Bhavin each for service in the temple of Gramapurush and Narayandev, the affiliate deities of Shantadurga. The kalavants, apart from their temple duties, were permitted to dance in the functions anywhere in the state for which they are invited, with the permission of the Managing Committee, but they had to pay a fixed fee to the Temple Treasury for taking such assignments (Compromisso 6, 1909). There are no bhavins or kalavants attached to the temple now (Sarjyotishi, 2011).

Article 47 of the Comromisso of temple of Devaki-Krishna at Marcel does not permit the servers of the external cult like the dancing girls to stay in the temple building, or premises or outhouses beyond their duty hours and they could be fined up to Re. 1/ for any transgression (Compromisso 8, 1910). Leena Mashelkar, the only bhavin attached to the temple, serves the temple of Devaki-Krishna at Marcel now a day.

The ladies have made major contributions, from the devadasi community attached to the temple of Mahalaxmi at Bandora. As a gesture of thanksgiving for the divine graces received, a Parsi gentleman from Bombay, Mr. Shapurji Sorabji Engineer completed renovation of the Mahalakshmi temple in 1916. The daughter of the temple servant, Nabubai Viswanath Katkar was largely responsible for this massive undertaking. She built the nagarkhana or the drum-house for the temple and also donated many gold plated silver articles. A silver-plated palanquin was donated by Mr. Hiralal Shet from Bombay in the memory of another devadasi, Kesharbai Katkar (Dhume, 1976). No kalavants are functioning now for this temple. But a woman Mhalu Naik from Mardol supplies daily flowers to the temple.

The devadasi system is an all-India phenomenon and at times traced originally to the dancing girl of Mohenjo-Daro (Basham, 1997). Earliest reference to them is found with respect to the temple of Mahakala in Ujjain, in Kalidasa's Meghadutam. Hundreds of women were attached to the temples of Tanjore and Travancore. Temple women owned property despite prohibitions of the Dharmashastras and economic power in south Indian temples through their donations during the Chola period (Orr, 2000). Joginis in Telangana was a legitimised practice in Andhra Pradesh (Mishra and Rao, 2002). French Jesuit, Abbe Dubois during his travels in south India had found them always associated with good luck (Shivaji, 1986). The devadasi system had appeared in Kerala with the emergence of the structural temples in the 7-8<sup>th</sup> centuries (Savelyeva, 2011). Those attached to the Shiva temple, were called Rudraganikas (Pillai, 1953). Poor deluded women tied the necklace of cowries and offered their daughters as Muralis to Khandoba at Jejuri in Maharashtra. Shankar proposes that the devadasi system is a deliberately created custom in order to exploit lower caste people in India by upper castes (Shankar, 1990). Another scholar has argued that the devadasi is a phenomenon much older than the times that she first appeared in temples (Karsenboom-Story, 1987). The mahari system at Jagannath Puri in Orissa is mentioned as an instance of gender injustice in Orissa (Pati, 1995).

Perhaps association of women with places of worship was a universal tradition. Nepal had the deukis. There was the high priestess in the temple of Innana in Sumeria. Dhume refers to the devadasi system in Goa as a reflection of Sumerian contact with the state in olden times. (Dhume, 1985). Ritual servitude was noticed in Ghana and Togo in Africa, Cyprus and Corinth. Sacred women of Babylonia have been listed in the official code (Luckenbill, 1917), while the Vestal virgins have been a distinctive cultic feature of Roman religious history (Beard, 1990).

In all the cases in Indian context, the temple women invariably lived a life of exploitation and moral degradation. Most of the times they suffered from deadly diseases and courted death. As such they left a negative legacy for their children as they carried a social stigma all their life. But when a devadasi died, the temple bore the expenses of the funeral, if she had no relatives. In certain temples, the noontime lamp rite gets postponed till the mortal remains of the woman are consigned to fire. The shensvidhi associated with the devadasi System has been banned by law in 1930, which was a result of the crusade launched by reformers like Rajaram Painginkar and Narayan Bandodkar. A new identity was created for the community by inaugurating the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. The community has enriched the musical traditions of India contributing several of its exponents. It has contributed many stalwarts in cultural, scientific, economic and political fields. In the recent times, the Govt. of Goa



through its Children's Act of 2003 as banished the tradition of dedication of a child to any deity along with providing right to education and health care. The young ladies of the community are getting married also settling with jobs in both, the private and the public sectors. Obviously, the devadasi system is on the verge of extinction.

Yet, the picture on the sacred scenario looks quite bleak for women. No temple extends membership to women as Mahajans. Except a select few, they are not permitted an entry into the sanctuary, nor to perform any major sacrifice independently. In the temple of Dattatreya at Sanquelim, women are segregated and asked to step down from the chauka during the lamp rite, which may be taken as a parallel example of the tradition that is followed at the Jewish synagogue, where the mehitzah is used as a barrier between men and women during prayers. Amazingly, a small notice pasted at the entrance of the aforementioned temple bans entry to people who have consumed non-vegetarian food, liquor and also for the women during their menstrual cycle. This condition made applicable to the women is in stark contrast to the tradition followed at the Kamkhya temple of Guwahati in Assam, which is the oldest of the Shaktipithas dedicated to the cult of the mother goddess, where the ambuvachi festival is celebrated annually to mark the menstrual cycle of the goddess herself (Dhere, 1988).

Once upon a time, magnanimous Indian seers had imagined the Ardhanari or the composite form of Shiva and his consort, Parvati. The first ever Vedic prayer Shrisukta was addressed to the goddess and it was composed by Vac, the daughter of sage Ambharna. Many of the Vedic hymns are credited to women like Ghosha, Gargi, Maitryi and Lopamudra. In the medieval period women were not encouraged to learn Sankrit and these days, they are not adequately motivated for it, which thwarts the possibility of emergence of women theologians who could re-interpret scriptures or contribute afresh. In such a scenario, the gender dynamics do remain tilted in favour of the men. The prevailing patriarchal social set up painstakingly keeps the women at bay particularly with respect to the religious rituals both in the family shrines and at the public temples, where they are allowed only a subordinate presence.

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