

Bridges and Barriers: A Village Eyeview

Nazar da Silva

Moirra-based senior citizen who writes on issues of much relevance to Goa.

nazardasilva@gmail.com

Systematically, a way of life has been undermined and destroyed to make way for a frantic frenzy of construction: Two international airports, superfast highways, over-passes, underpasses, a second track for the railways, golf courses, casinos, top-heavy hospitality industry, is this development for Moirra and the state of Goa? [This first appeared in Goanet Reader]

In the tidal waters that embrace the beautiful village of Moirra, a number of little islands dot the stunning panorama.

Like the banks of the rivers, the little isles too have been manually shored up with hunks of laterite rock. Truly, that was a marvellous feat of engineering undertaken by our ancestors not very long after the wheel was invented!

In this idyllic serenity, marine life, even now, continues to abound peacefully. The plop of a playful prawn vaulting joyously on the surface of the water, the plaintive cry of a bird in the mangroves, the ever-present screech of crickets in the background and the sound of distant traffic, all are singing: “It is well with my soul”. Perhaps, with a little bit of imagination, you can hear the deep velvet voice of Whitney Phipps as it rises to a heart-rending crescendo when he sings in Carnegie Hall: “It is well. It is well, - - - with my soul”.

Flipping through the many photographs taken of Theen Manos, (the popular triple sluice-gate), one can see an island in the background. At one time, our family cultivated rice in those paddy-fields of happy memories.

The process, after the harvest, was to par-boil the paddy in great copper vessels, sun-dry and store the un-husked paddy in a very large ‘khondoh’ (a bottomless basket) made of woven bamboo matting. Both ends of this huge container—that was erected in our ‘dark’ room—were sealed with dry straw.

Usually that ‘khondoh’ was used to store a year’s supply of un-husked rice: rice was a staple for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Small portions of the grain were periodically husked in a shallow punning hole carved out of a solid rock that was buried in the kitchen floor.

The husking tools (‘musar’) were simple shafts of smooth, highly polished wood, about 4 ft. long and 2 inch diameter, each tipped with a sharp metal ring at one end. The ‘musar’ was effectively used with a pounding action. Usually two women with ‘a ear for music’ were employed to do the husking together. Like a two-stroke engine, each of the women equipped with her own ‘musar’, had to strike alternately at the same target in split-second succession and with a sure aim. It was fascinating to watch them work: once they got into their rhythm, they sang like canaries, and work progressed in perfect unison and harmony with an occasional verbal prod from ‘avo’ (our Grandma)!

I would not be digressing if at this point I injected my own story as the accredited captain of a ship: Well-I-I-I: My ‘ship’ was nothing to write home about. It had neither keel nor outrigger. It was a simple canoe made from the hollowed out trunk of a tree. The wood was treated with the resin exuded from roasting raw cashew-nuts.

The boat was hired out by the day for little or nothing. We used it to ferry the field workers to the island fields and back. I won my laurels to man the boat almost a century ago when I was still just pushing my teens.

The trick was to keep everyone calmly seated on the deck—without deck chairs! If anyone moved, it shifted the centre of gravity and the result could be hilarious. I witnessed such a scene and still get a laugh out of it. Passengers and crew, all dripping wet, not with sweat, but with salt water. It was a scene that Mario Miranda (God bless his soul) would have revelled in, had he been there.

My stint ‘on the boat’ was short-lived but memorable: in my youth, an old salt taught me how to manoeuvre a dug-out canoe. His instructions for keeping course were simple: use the paddle on both sides of the boat. According to him, if you use the paddle only on one side, you’d be going round in circles. So everyone I knew paddled three strokes on one side and then switched sides to paddle three strokes on the other side to maintain course.

Like a true Moidecar, I discovered there was a better way of paddling. Seated on the stern, I used the oar, both as paddle and rudder. Simple! Three or four strokes to move forward, then one ‘stroke’ on the same side, but as a rudder, to maintain course.

Guess what? At the time, I did not think too much of my ‘discovery’ and failed to share the knowledge until one day when I was ferrying an old man across. As we approached the banks at a good lick, he got quite agitated. He threw his hands up: “What are you doing?” he loudly exclaimed in exasperation. I guess he was expecting the canoe to crash into the bank. But to his utter surprise the canoe veered gently to accomplish a perfect docking in port. No ‘Seven Short One Long; alarm! No panic buttons to abandon ship. At the crucial moment, I had used the oar as a rudder. He couldn’t believe it. That was my Dad!

I guess I am older now; and I am seen as ‘old-fashioned’; but the truth is apparent in what we do and how we do it. We move with the times, but we don’t let the times rule us! The motto seems to be quite innocent: ‘Build bridges, not barriers’.

But the intent is ominous. Conversion, (for the fanatics), means nothing less, or nothing more, than conversion of land-use. The ‘manos’ (sluice gates) are our bridges. The ‘baans’ (bunds) are our barriers.

The cultivation of paddy was once our livelihood. Systematically, our way of life has been undermined and destroyed to make way for a frantic frenzy of extreme construction: Two international airports within hollering distance of each other and consequent crazy infrastructure! Superfast Highways (presumably with sound barriers on either side), over-passes, underpasses, a second track for the railways, golf courses, casinos, top-heavy hospitality industry. All for the tiny State of Goa!

This is legalised rape. Nothing less. And it is called development? Not a thought in the world for the common citizen. We are displaced, discredited, demeaned, and marginalised. Our livelihood, our way of life destroyed, ecological constraints totally ignored and our ethical values, severely under threat. What on earth has happened to Freedom? Is ‘licentiousness’ the only description of Freedom in this age of horrific violence? Has that become ‘a way of life’ for simple souls?

Too tiring; too depressing: to describe the havoc wreaked on this hapless land. I am tired; I am weak; and I am worn. But I have hope. I always have hope. I count on the new generation. Surely they will pick up the gauntlet. They never will give up the struggle. They

will help us 'overcome'. They will restore sanity. They will restore tranquillity. God bless us all.

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Goanet Reader is compiled and edited by Frederick Noronha, who invites insightful, descriptive and well-argued articles related to Goa, its people (including its diaspora), which can be sent in for consideration via fredericknoronha2@gmail.com.

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