

Climbing Against the Odds

Shweta Gaonkar and the Revival of Goa's Toddy Tapping Tradition

By Kajal

In an age when success is increasingly defined by government postings, corporate salaries and air-conditioned offices, Shweta Gaonkar's workday begins several feet above the ground, balancing herself on coconut palms. As one of Goa's first women toddy tappers, she has stepped into a profession long dominated by men and slowly fading from the aspirations of the younger generation. Through knowledge, discipline and quiet confidence, Shweta is not only keeping a traditional livelihood alive but also proving that dignity and growth can exist far beyond white-collar boundaries.

Shweta's journey did not begin with toddy tapping. She holds a BSc degree in Agriculture, a qualification that often leads graduates



towards desk jobs, research roles or teaching careers. During her college years, however, it was fieldwork rather than classrooms that captured her interest. Working closely with soil, crops and farmers shaped her understanding of agriculture as a living system rather than an academic subject.

"Agriculture taught me that real learning happens in the field," she says. "When you apply knowledge practically, you begin to see opportunities that others ignore."

Toddy tapping, deeply woven into Goa's rural and cultural identity, involves extracting sap from coconut palms twice a day. The sap is used fresh or fermented to make traditional beverages. Despite its cultural importance, the profession is widely seen as risky, physically demanding and socially undervalued. Very few young people choose it

today, and even fewer women.

When Shweta decided to enter this space, reactions were mixed. Curiosity, disbelief and quiet judgment followed her decision.

"Many people questioned why I would do such hard work after studying agriculture," she recalls. "But inside my house, I never faced opposition. My parents supported me completely. My mother, especially, trusted my decisions."

That support gave her the confidence to continue, even when the work tested her limits. Toddy tapping is not seasonal farming. It is a year-round responsibility. Coconut palms must be tapped every morning and evening, without interruption.

"This is not a job where you can take holidays whenever you want," Shweta explains. "The trees depend on you every single day. If you stop, the yield is affected."

Physically, the work demanded endurance. Climbing tall trees, maintaining balance, handling sharp tools and working at heights require strength and focus. For a woman entering a male-dominated field, the challenges were sharper. "In the beginning, my body struggled," she says honestly. "There was pain, swelling and fatigue. But slowly, with practice, it became part of my routine."

What helped her persist was not just physical training but her academic background. Her understanding of plant physiology, hybridisation and crop management allowed her to approach toddy tapping scientifically rather than traditionally.

"Knowing where to cut, how much to slice and how to protect the tree is crucial," she explains. "A wrong cut can damage the palm and stop it from yielding."

Instead of relying solely on old rope-based



climbing techniques, Shweta adopted modern climbing machines. These tools provide better grip, improved balance and enhanced safety, significantly reducing physical strain and risk.

"With new equipment, the work becomes safer and more efficient," she says. "You don't need brute strength. You need concentration and correct technique."

Over time, Shweta's role expanded beyond toddy tapping. She also works as a farm manager, overseeing different agricultural activities and managing farms that include coconut cultivation. Her days often begin early and stretch long, moving between trees, fields and planning work.

She firmly believes toddy tapping has strong economic potential, especially for rural youth who struggle with unstable incomes and limited job opportunities.

"Once a coconut palm matures, it gives income every day," she explains. "You don't have to wait for months like with other crops."

According to her, toddy tapping offers a rare

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For many young Goans today, Liberation Day is just another public holiday. Flags go up, speeches are made, and life moves on. But for Rohidas Desai, president of the Goa, Daman Freedom Fighters Association, freedom is written in blood, sacrifice and lifelong struggle. A veteran of the underground movement against Portuguese rule, Desai speaks with clarity, pain and pride about a history he fears is slowly being forgotten. In this candid conversation on Goenchi Asmitai, he revisits the liberation movement, the role of Azad Gomantak Dal, the suffering of villages like Cuncolim and Cortalim, and his disappointment with how freedom fighters and their families are treated today.

"Freedom Is Not a Holiday, It Is a Responsibility"

A Conversation with Goan Freedom Fighter Rohidas De-



Goenchi Asmitai | by Kajal

Q: Rohidas sir, when people hear the words 'Goa Liberation', what should they truly understand?

Rohidas Desai: Freedom did not come easily. It was not gifted. It was fought for. Many Goans today think liberation happened in 1961 in just one day. That is not true. The struggle started much earlier. We fought

underground for years. People were arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed. Families were destroyed. Villages were terrorised.

Freedom means sacrifice. Freedom means people leaving their homes, going underground, and not knowing whether they would see their families again.

Q: How did your own journey as a freedom fighter begin?

Rohidas Desai: I come from a family deeply involved in the freedom movement. When we saw how Portuguese rule crushed our identity, religion, language and dignity, we could not stay silent. Our people were treated as second-class citizens in their own land.

I joined the Azad Gomantak Dal under the leadership of Vishwanath Lavande. Along with many others like Rajan Kosh Desai,

Shabu Desai, Dattaram Desai, Narayan Naik and several village youths, we decided to fight back.

Q: What kind of operations did Azad Gomantak Dal carry out?

Rohidas Desai: We attacked Portuguese police outposts, looted weapons and ammunition, and disrupted their control. These were not symbolic acts. These were real, dangerous operations. Many of us

were arrested without warrants. Some were captured without any military trial.

In 1954, one of our first major actions led to arrests. Many of us had to go underground. We moved from village to village, from forest to forest, often without food. The Indian government at that time did not openly support us. Whatever help came was indirect and limited.

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Sunday Thought

Goa's Land Crisis: Stop Blaming Outsiders, Start Looking Inward

By Suraj Nandrekar

The debate on land, development and so called "outside builders" in Goa has dragged on for years. Every discussion eventually arrives at the same familiar conclusion. Outsiders are looting Goa, Delhi builders are destroying the environment, and locals are helpless victims. It is an argument that sounds emotionally satisfying, but it avoids the harder and more inconvenient truth. Goa's crisis is not imported. It is largely self-created.

The first question that must be asked is simple. Who is selling land in Goa at huge prices? No builder from Delhi or Mumbai can forcibly take land from a Goan. Every sale involves consent, paperwork and payment. Land changes hands because Goan owners choose to sell. Pretending otherwise turns a voluntary transaction into a fictional act of coercion.

Next comes the question of invitation. Builders do not arrive unannounced. They come because local landowners are willing, local middlemen facilitate deals, and local authorities process permissions. Development does not happen secretly in a democracy. Files move through panchayats, taluka offices, planning departments and ministerial desks. These systems are not run by outsiders. They are run here, by Goans.

Look closely at local governance. Panchayats are headed by Goan sarpanchas and members elected by villagers. Block development officers and mamlatdars largely come from the same society they administer. The Town and Country Planning department, Planning and Development Authorities, and pollution control bodies function under Goan leadership. The TCP minister is Goan. MLAs are Goans. Directors of departments are Goans. Decisions that change land use, convert zones and permit construction are cleared locally, not dictated from outside.

Yet, when the consequences become visible, when green fields disappear and hills are cut, the

blame shifts outward. The "builder lobby" becomes the easy villain. This narrative allows land sellers, officials and politicians to escape scrutiny. It is convenient, but dishonest.



India's Constitution gives every citizen the right to live and do business anywhere in the country. Goa is not exempt from this principle. Outsiders investing in Goa is not illegal by default. The real problem begins when laws are diluted, bent or selectively enforced by those sworn to uphold them. That responsibility rests firmly with Goa's political and administrative leadership.

A more difficult question remains. Why are Goans selling ancestral land, often in eco-sensitive areas? The answers are uncomfortable. Easy money, changing lifestyles, declining interest in farming, and the belief that land has value only when converted into cash. Many sellers know what will rise on their land, but choose short-term gain over long-term consequences. Silence is purchased along with the cheque.

Corruption too does not exist in isolation. Politicians do not become corrupt without public consent. They are elected, re-elected and protected by voters who know their records. If the same leaders return to power despite allegations and public protests, then responsibility does not lie with politicians alone. It lies with the electorate.

Even activism must introspect. Why is pressure rarely applied on landowners not to sell, especially in fragile zones? Why is outrage reserved only for builders and not for those who enable them? Environmental protection cannot survive on selective accountability.

The uncomfortable truth is this. Goa's land crisis is not just about outsiders. It is about choices made by Goans. Choices to sell land. Choices to approve files. Choices to stay silent. Choices to vote without memory. Until Goans acknowledge their own role, nothing will change. Blaming outsiders may offer temporary satisfaction, but it will not save Goa. Accountability begins at home. The moment Goans accept that, the real fight to protect Goa can finally begin.

Masterstroke

The Day of Judgement – December 22, 2025

By Irfan Iqbal Gheta

The Goa Zilla Panchayat Elections 2025 are finally over. Goa went to the polls yesterday. Vote counting is scheduled for tomorrow, and by then the dust will begin to settle. The results will offer a clear signal of the public mood and, more importantly, an indication of which way the political wind is blowing.

The larger question is unavoidable. Will the Zilla Panchayat results serve as a trailer for the Goa Assembly Elections of 2027?

The ruling party enters the contest with a clear advantage. It commands the state machinery and enjoys organisational depth. On the other side stands a fractured opposition that has once again demonstrated, beyond doubt, that opposition unity in Goa remains more slogan than substance. The idea of a common front looks distant and, at present, unachievable.

With too many loud voices, conflicting statements, sarcasm and personal attacks flying thick and fast, how can a common minimum agenda even be drafted? If the stated objective is to save Goa and wrest power from the saffron party, then personal ambitions and inflated egos must be put on hold. Unfortunately, that political maturity is nowhere in sight.

This leaves the ordinary voter in a deeply uncomfortable position. The Goan voter wants clean governance, safety, security and dignity for both self and state. Instead, she is confronted with confusion. There are many options on paper, including NOTA. But are there credible options that inspire confidence?

The dominant narrative surrounding the grand old party is particularly damaging. Voters are repeatedly told not to trust it because its elected

representatives will defect after winning. What has the party done to dispel this perception? Very little.

Relentless attacks on the ruling party have yielded diminishing returns.

A lacklustre social media presence, absence of a sharp and coherent message, persistent rumours of internal rifts, and whispers of backdoor understandings have only deepened voter disillusionment. The party appears reactive rather than visionary.

One regional party with a lone MLA fares no better. Can voters trust a party that once supported the late Bhai and, in doing so, facilitated the present political landscape? What steps has it taken to confront or correct that legacy? Attacking the ruling elite alone is no longer enough. Voters battered by misgovernance are demanding a credible blueprint and a larger vision for Goa's future.

The party from New Delhi, projecting itself as an anti-corruption crusader, believes it can unseat the ruling dispensation on its own. Its argument is simple. Other parties are corrupt, and their leaders will defect. While this may resonate with a section of voters, political isolation carries its own risks, especially in a complex state like Goa.

Another regional party, also with one MLA, has failed to shape the battle of perception. It lacks polish, coherence and a political vocabulary that genuinely reflects the aspirations of the Niz Goemkars it claims to represent.

So where does this leave Goa, battered and bruised? The answer is straightforward. Stop the infighting. Present a united front. Develop a shared vision. Offer a concrete blueprint for development. Communicate with clarity and purpose.



Even When In Dispute, Mhadei Can't Be Viewed From Framework of Technicality: Experts

The Mhadei is more than just an irrigation water body; it's a memory archive.

Our rivers are being treated as sewage sinks, where we dump toxic pollutants and urban waste, experts decried.

Moving beyond courtroom arguments and engineering calculations, experts at a MOG Sunday session at the Museum of Goa, Pilerne, called for a broader public understanding of one of Goa's most contested natural systems involving the Mhadei river, which is also referred to as the Mandovi river.

Titled 'From Water Resources to Commons: Reframing the Mhadei Dispute', the discussion that followed a presentation and a film screening examined how the river has been reduced to a mere technicality, sidelining its ecological complexity, cultural life and historical depth.

According to Dr Solano Da Silva, faculty in development studies and politics at BITS Pilani



in South Goa, debates around the Mhadei have long been dominated by irrigation engineers and legal experts. "When we frame the river only through infrastructure and litigation, we lose sight of the social worlds and ecological timescales it sustains," he said, adding that such narrow framing limits public imagination and long-term responsibility.

Independent scholar

Prof. Peter R. deSouza proposed multiple ways of seeing the river, drawn from the research presented in the book, 'The River Mhadei: The Science and Politics of Diversion'. He described the Mhadei as a memory archive, a source of livelihoods, a carrier of ecosystems, a site of political contestation and a witness to deep geological time. "If we see the river only as water

to be diverted, we miss everything else it carries," he said.

The discussion also addressed how everyday practices in Goa have contributed to the river's degradation. Referring to untreated sewage, mining impacts and unregulated development along riverbanks, the speakers argued that treating rivers as waste sinks or commercial zones erodes their status as shared public commons. "We are not owners of the river," deSouza noted, "we are custodians, trustees for future generations."

Historian Prof. Lakshmi Subramanian went ahead to situate the Mhadei within longer cultural and political histories, noting how rivers in the subcontinent have shaped settlement patterns, ritual calendars and regional identities. She stressed

that disputes such as the Mhadei cannot be separated from questions of governance, memory and cultural continuity.

Following the presentation, the documentary film Maa Dei, based on the importance of the river that originates in Karnataka, passes through Maharashtra and empties into the Arabian Sea in Goa, was screened. The film complements the book by offering a visual and aesthetic engagement with the river, foregrounding its landscapes, rhythms and the communities that live along its banks. Rather than presenting solutions, the film invites viewers to observe the river as a living presence shaped by labour, ritual and seasonal change.

Audiences were also introduced to www.



mhadeicollective.com, an open-access digital repository hosting the book, film and related research materials.

Conceived as a shared knowledge platform, the website aims to support public engagement, continued discussion and future research around the Mhadei, ensuring that conversations about the river extend beyond policy rooms and legal hearings into civic life.

In a digital landscape crowded with creators chasing trends, Atharva Naik has chosen a different path—one built on identity, intent, and enterprise. Known widely by his unconventional Instagram persona "stupid_dictator," Atharva represents a new-age Goan entrepreneur who has successfully bridged the worlds of content creation, business strategy, and traditional enterprise.

At first glance, the handle stupid_dictator sounds deliberately provocative. But that irony is central to Atharva's approach. The name is less about shock value and more about philosophy—confidence without arrogance, authority without taking oneself too seriously. In a space where curated perfection dominates, the persona stands out precisely because it questions that perfection.

Growing up in Goa played a defining role in shaping Atharva's outlook.

From Screen to Strategy: The Many Lives of Atharva Naik, aka "stupid_dictator"

The state's layered culture, easy pace of life, and sharp, understated humour subtly influenced his creative instincts. Goa teaches you to observe before reacting, to laugh at contradictions, and to value individuality. These elements translate naturally into his content, which often relies on relatability rather than exaggeration. His humour is not loud; it is observational—rooted in everyday experiences that resonate with a wide audience.

Atharva's creative journey did not stop at posting reels or building a following. Recognising the limitations of influence alone, he expanded into entrepreneurship. Today, he runs three companies

across influencer marketing, videography, and real estate, each addressing a different dimension of the modern economy.

His marketing and influencer agency draws directly from his experience as a creator. Understanding algorithms, audience psychology, and brand expectations allows him to operate from both sides of the table. For brands, this means campaigns that are practical and platform-ready; for creators, it means collaborations that respect creative integrity.

Complementing this is his videography venture, which focuses on visual storytelling. In an era dominated by short-form video, Atharva understood

early that strong visuals are no longer optional—they are essential. By controlling production in-house, he ensures consistency, quality, and narrative clarity across projects, whether for digital campaigns or brand promotions.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of his portfolio is his involvement in real estate. While digital businesses thrive on speed and trends, real estate demands patience, trust, and long-term thinking. Atharva's move into this traditionally structured sector reflects a strategic mindset—one that values stability alongside visibility. His creative background gives him an edge here too, particularly in how

properties are marketed and positioned.

Balancing these varied pursuits is no small task. Atharva approaches it through clear separation of roles. Creativity is allowed freedom; business is handled with discipline. This ability to switch mindsets has been crucial in sustaining growth without burnout—an issue that plagues many creators who turn entrepreneurs.

Like any visible figure, Atharva's journey has attracted opinions and scrutiny. But rather than reacting to every narrative, his focus remains on building systems and scaling responsibly. Associations with influential figures, including political



personalities like Vijai Sardesai, are handled with care—grounded in respect but without compromising independence. For Atharva, access does not mean alignment; learning does not mean imitation.

Humour remains a defining element of his public persona. In Goa, where life itself often presents quiet irony, Atharva finds content by observing rather than manufacturing moments. What feels real tends to work—and that authenticity has become his strongest currency.

Looking ahead, Atharva Naik embodies a shift from influencer culture to founder culture. His story is not about viral fame but about leverage—using attention to build assets, skills, and sustainable businesses. In doing so, stupid_dictator has evolved from a username into a brand that reflects a larger truth of the digital age: influence may open doors, but intent decides how far you go.

Concerto de Natal lights up the Museum of Goa with music, memory and Christmas cheer

Pilerne: The Museum of Goa in Pilerne was steeped in music and festive warmth on Sunday evening as Concerto de Natal, a special Christmas concert presented by Oscar Castellino and The Timemakers, unfolded as one of the season's most engaging cultural evenings.

At the centre of the programme was Oscar Castellino, the internationally acclaimed Goan opera singer and composer, whose artistic vision shaped a rich and thoughtful repertoire. Moving seamlessly between Konkani and Portuguese compositions and familiar Christmas carols, the concert reflected Goa's layered cultural heritage while capturing the shared joy of the season. Castellino's assured musical direction and easy rapport with the audience drew warm



responses, with listeners singing along and even breaking into spontaneous dance in true Goan style.

The evening also included a felicitation ceremony hosted by the Museum of Goa. Francisco Fernandes Barreto and Anita Barbosa Barreto, parents of Clayton Fernandes Barreto, were honoured in absentia as they were unable to attend due to unavoidable circumstances. The recognition acknowledged the exemplary service of their son, who serves

as S. Secretary to the High Commissioner of India at the Indian High Commission in London.

Clayton Fernandes Barreto has earned wide respect for his sustained outreach to Goans and the wider Indian community in the United Kingdom. His support, guidance and inclusive approach have helped strengthen community ties and earned appreciation across Goan associations in the UK.

Musically, the concert offered several moving moments. One of the

highlights was the release of a new Christmas carol, Ball Jezu Zolmolo, composed by Castellino and set to a poem by the late, eminent Goan poet Manohar Rai Sardessai. Presented as a tribute to the poet's enduring literary legacy, the piece was warmly received. The evening also marked the first collaboration between Umesh Sardessai and Castellino, pointing to new creative exchanges rooted in Goan culture.

Castellino was joined on stage by a fine ensemble of musicians: Chelsea D'Silva on vocals, Jason Quadros on piano, Nahil Flores on percussion with the traditional Goan ghumot, and Senon de Souza on violin. Together, they presented a compelling repertoire featuring works by Manohar Rai Sardessai, Micael Martins, Gabriel Pais, Adolphe



Adam and Castellino himself, drawing repeated applause.

Earlier in the day, the Museum of Goa hosted a Christmas Fair that set the tone for the evening. Visitors explored a pop up by The Crochet Collective of Goa, a DIY holiday décor open studio for children, and festive food and beverages, including wines from Big Banyan and craft beer from Susegado.

Midway through the programme, Castellino was accorded a special tribute by Clayton Fernandes Barreto in recognition of his contribution to music and culture. The citation read:

"To Oscar Castellino, with deep admiration for your exceptional artistry as a Goan opera singer and your distinguished presence on the UK stage. Your achievements uplift our heritage and enrich the world of music."

The tribute was met with warm applause, reflecting Castellino's international standing and his continued commitment to celebrating Goan heritage through music.

Concerto de Natal closed as a heartfelt celebration of music, culture and community, reinforcing the Museum of Goa's place as a vibrant cultural space during the Christmas season.

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Climbing Against the Odds

advantage in agriculture. It provides quick returns and steady daily earnings when done correctly. Even a small number of palms can generate a reliable income.

"This is one of the few agricultural activities where income starts within days," she says. "With skill, consistency and care, it becomes sustainable."

Shweta is particularly concerned about how young people perceive work today. She feels the heavy focus on government and white-collar jobs has led to the neglect of skill-based livelihoods.

"A government job gives fixed income and security, which is important," she says. "But here, your income depends on your effort and skill. There is no ceiling."

She also highlights that toddy tapping is not as unsupported as many assume. Government departments regularly conduct training programmes, provide free climbing equipment, offer insurance coverage and extend financial assistance to those willing to learn.

"There are six-day training programmes organised regularly," she explains. "Climbing machines are provided, insurance is included and guidance is available. The support system exists. Awareness is the missing link."

One change that gives her hope is the increasing participation of women in training programmes.

"Earlier, women were rarely seen in these spaces," she says. "Now, women are coming forward to learn. That shift is important."

Shweta herself has participated in training sessions not just as a learner but also as someone others look up to. She describes these interactions as deeply encouraging.

"People ask questions, want to learn and are curious," she says. "That curiosity shows that interest is growing."

With coconut toddy and related products receiving geographical indication recognition, Shweta believes the profession is entering a new phase.

"Our traditional products are finally getting recognition," she says. "If quality, hygiene and safety are maintained, the scope is huge."

For her, toddy tapping is not merely a source of income. It is a connection to land, culture and self-respect.

"I feel proud doing this work," she says. "It keeps me connected to my roots and reminds me that agriculture still has power."

In a society that often equates success with office spaces and job titles, Shweta Gaonkar's journey challenges those assumptions. Every time she climbs a coconut tree, she quietly breaks stereotypes, showing that tradition, when combined with education and innovation, can offer not just survival but a meaningful and confident future.

"Freedom Is Not a Holiday, It Is a Responsibility"

Q: Can you describe the risks you faced personally?

Rohidas Desai: Every day could have been the last. Portuguese police were ruthless. If caught, torture was guaranteed. There was no human rights protection. Some of our comrades disappeared completely. Families were punished for sheltering freedom fighters.

There were days when we had no food, no shelter, and no medical help. Yet, no one complained. We believed Goa deserved freedom.

Q: Villages like Cuncolim suffered deeply under Portuguese rule. What do you remember about that period?

Rohidas Desai: Cuncolim was brutally punished. Entire villages were labelled dangerous or criminal. Properties were seized. Temples were destroyed. Forced conversions were carried out. People were beaten and humiliated. The Portuguese wanted to break the spirit of Goans. They failed. But the scars remain. These stories are missing from textbooks today.

Q: What happened to freedom fighters after the Liberation in 1961?

Rohidas Desai: That is one of my biggest disappointments. After liberation, many freedom fighters were ignored. Recognition came late, and for some, never came at all. There were people who fought actively but were never officially recognised. At the same time, some who did nothing managed to get certificates. Many genuine freedom fighters died poor, forgotten and bitter.

Q: Governments often speak of honouring freedom fighters. How true is that on the

ground?

Rohidas Desai: There are speeches and promises, but action is limited. Welfare schemes are slow. Families of freedom fighters struggle. Promises of government jobs for children were made but not fulfilled properly. I personally know cases where sons and daughters of freedom fighters applied for jobs, passed interviews, and were later rejected due to age or technical reasons. This is an injustice.

Q: Do you feel today's generation understands this history?

Rohidas Desai: No, and that worries me. For today's youth, Liberation Day is just a holiday. They don't know the names, the places, the sacrifices. They don't know who Vishwanath Lavande was, or what Azad Gomantak Dal did. If history is forgotten, freedom loses its value.

Q: Goa today faces issues like land destruction, migration and environmental damage. How do you see this?

Rohidas Desai: This is another kind of loss of freedom. When land is taken without people's consent, when hills are cut, when locals are pushed out, that is not real freedom. Goans fought foreign rule, not to lose control to unchecked power and corruption. Today, fear has returned in another form.

Q: As a freedom fighter, what does 'true freedom' mean to you today?

Rohidas Desai: True freedom means dignity, justice and fearlessness. It means people should not be afraid of the authorities. It means laws should protect citizens, not silence them.