

Constructing an image of women in Goa on eve of Portuguese arrival with special reference to folklore

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Abstract: *The status of women in Pre-Portuguese Goa was discriminatory in comparison to men. The major source through which we come to know about Goan women is Goan folklore be it proverbs or folksongs. The overall picture that can be discerned about women from folklore is that marriage occupied an important place in their lives. A married woman was considered to be a complete being against unmarried woman. Since woman was solely dependent on her husband, after his demise she either committed sati or lived a miserable life of a widow. On educational front she didn't receive much education and her sole knowledge was considered to be confined to kitchen. She was thought to be better suited to acquire cooking skills rather than theoretical knowledge. This was the case with majority of women with the exceptions of royal women and Kalvants. The royal women ie queens availed of education and at times handled administrative duties too. While kalvants were temple servants or dancing girls who did not marry and therefore led a life quite different from the majority of women.*

Key Words: *bail (woman), marriage, sati, widow, kalvants.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The sources for the study of position of women in Pre-Portuguese Goa are quite rare hence we have to rely on oral sources for the same. Both the Konkani proverbs and folksongs reflect the position of women in Pre-Portuguese Goa. Since proverbs reflect the past experiences of the people and are thought to possess some general truth¹, those which are insulting and sometimes belittles women tells us about the kind of status accorded to them in the society in which these proverbs were born.

The major study on the position of women in Goa is done by Fatima da Silva Gracias² however this paper is a humble attempt to search for more such Konkani proverbs or any other aspect of folklore which depicts women which is not covered under her work.

It is quite clear from the available sources that the Goan society was patriarchal in nature where men exercised dominance over women. The Konkani saying “*Dhadlo Baile Adlo*”³ (Man is superior to woman) reflect this thinking. It was believed by the then society that a man has an upper hand over a woman. Being a woman one had to accept their difficulties and inequalities without questioning as seen in the proverb “*Baile zalmak padlam puta konak shintalim*”⁴ (Whom to blame if born as a woman). The image regarding the Goan women's position is constructed under various sub-headings.

2. Royal Women:

There are few references of royal women shouldering the administrative responsibilities and exercising influence on the king to donate lands and issue grants to Brahmins. The Bhoja King Prithvimallavarman's copper plates found at Bandora in the Ponda taluka mentions that the land was granted to a Brahmin at the request⁵ or for the merit of queen mother Chetasadevi.⁶ Nerur and Kochren inscriptions refers to Vijayamahadevi or Vijayabhatarika queen of Chandraditya

¹ Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 5.

² Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994).

³ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), p. 52.

⁴ Kamaladevi Rao Deshpande, *Mhanni Fatli Kani Vol II*(Margao:Asmitai Pratishitan, 1998), p. 70.

⁵ Sr. Emma Maria A.C., *Women in Portuguese Goa 1510-1835* (Tellicherry:IRISH, 2002), p.4; V R Mitrageotri, *A Socio-Cultural Histroy of Goa From the Bhojas to the Vijayanagara* (Panaji:Institute Menezes Braganza, 1990), p.70.

⁶ V T Gune, ed. *Gazetteer of Goa, Daman and Diu Vol I* (Panaji:Gazetteer Department, 1979), p. 65; Gerald Pereira, *An Outline of Pre-Portuguese History of Goa* (Panaji: Dairio da Noite Press, 1973), p.23.

governor of Konkan Vishaya under Badami Chalukyas donating a land to Brahmins.⁷ After the death of her husband she even handled the administration of the state during the infancy of her son.⁸

Kamaladevi the wife of Kadamba ruler Permadideva who succeeded to the throne in 1147 AD was the chief queen among his wives. She along with her husband established a number of agraharas or seats of learning in many parts of the Kingdom. In these agraharas a variety of subjects such as vedas, vedangas, Nyaya, Mimansa, Yoga, Puranas were taught besides the best system of astronomy.⁹

These decisions of the queens to grant lands to the Brahmins or establishing agraharas indicate the fact that they were well versed in reading and writing. However this cannot be said of women in general who were subjected to lot of discriminations and they were considered inapt in decision making. Hence they were dependent throughout their life; first on the father then on the husband and then on the son. Therefore marriage occupied an important role in the life of a woman.

3. Marriage :

The Pre-Portuguese Goan society was obsessed with the marriage of the girl child. The obsession was so much so that there was prevalence of child marriages in Goa. Reference to child marriages is found in the Konkani saying "*Bara chol govachea ghara*"¹⁰(you are twelve go to the house of your husband). Sometimes the girls were married even before they attain the age of twelve. Women were associated only with marriage and rearing of children as can be understood from the Konkani proverb "*Bailanchi khuxi poili kazar zanzvchi, dusri vegli sorchi, tisri bhurgeball zanzvchi*"¹¹(The desire of a woman is to get married first, then to get separated from the mother-in-law, then beget children). The other proverb too reflects the same thinking "*Khatlen khanvcho fov, nashiban melcho gov*"¹² (To eat grated coconut with beaten rice, to accept a husband which fate has ordained).

The parents of the girl child made every effort to marry their daughter as soon as possible. But if due to some reasons this could not be achieved then the aged girl was no longer considered to be a prospective match for anyone as can be gathered from the proverb "*Vadlili chali kuslali panvalli*"¹³ (A grown up daughter is like areca-tree's rotten spathe). Against this background the parents of the girl child were eager to give her in marriage to anyone as seen in the proverb "*Vaddelem chedun modlelea gharak*"¹⁴ (Grown up girl for a ruined house).

The parents of the girl child often gave dowry to the bridegroom. This was decided according to the financial capacity of the father of the girl child. However the family of the bridegroom was never satisfied with what they received and their demands were ever increasing. This can be gathered from the Konkani proverb "*Chedvachya ghovak dilem itlem thodem*"¹⁵(However much you may give to the husband of the daughter, it is not enough). They were happy only if the bride brought huge dowry along with her as reflected in the proverb "*Vajem zod zalear soirim god*"¹⁶ (If dowry is heavy then relatives of a bridegroom remain sweet). The girl's family was always expected to agree to the demands of the family of the bridegroom as can be seen from the proverb "*Chedvankaranche man sodanch khalti*"¹⁷ (the head of those who have daughters is always inclined). The marriage was considered an expensive affair as can be seen from the proverb "*Eka lagnak bara vighnam*"¹⁸(For one wedding dozen hurdles).

It was because of the burden of dowry that the girl child was not preferred at birth. The parents always desired a male child over a girl as seen in the proverb "*Nidilegher zalo chalo ani zaghegher zali chali*"¹⁹ (One who slept begot a boy

⁷ V R Mitragotri, *A Socio-Cultural History of Goa From the Bhojas to the Vijayanagara* (Panaji:Institute Menezes Braganza, 1990), p.70; V T Gune, ed. *Gazetteer of Goa, Daman and Diu Vol I* (Panaji:Gazetteer Department, 1979), p. 79-80.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ George M. Moraes, *The Kadamba kula A History of Ancient and Medieval Karnataka* (New Delhi:Asian Educational Services, 1990), p. 199-200.

¹⁰ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), 49.

¹¹ Edward de Lima, *Konkni Oparincho Kox* (Porvorim: Vikram Publications, 2017), p.335.

¹² Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 41.

¹³ Antonio Pereira, S.J, *Konkanni Oparinchem Bandar The Treasure of Konkani Proverbs* (Goa: Antonio Pereira, S.J, 1985), p. 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁵ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), p. 52.

¹⁶ Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 64.

¹⁷ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), p.49.

¹⁸ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994), p. 54.

¹⁹ Kamaladevi Rao Deshpande, *Mhanni Fatli Kani Vol I*(Margao:Asmitai Pratishitan, 1998), p. 211.

and one who kept a night vigil begot a girl). Girl child was considered an economic burden on the parents and hence was not desired. This thinking is reflected in the following proverb “*Kazar karche aadim chedun zad, kazar kartach god*”²⁰ (Before the marriage, the girl is a burden, after marriage is sweet). However boy child was always considered an asset and beneficial for the parents as seen in the proverb “*Chedo zaleak ani maad layileak bhed na*”²¹ (There is no difference between the birth of a boy and planting of a coconut tree). Just the way coconut tree is useful and remains in the compound of a house forever similar is the case with a son.

The women were expected to be dutiful and submissive to their husbands. Even if she was subjected to beating by her husband the society considered it as a normal behavior. The Konkani sayings like “*Kandleabagar fov nay, marleabagar gov nay*”²² (Without pounding flattened rice are not obtained similarly husband is incomplete without beating his wife), “*Ghovan bailek marlear demand na*”²³ (In case the husband beats the wife she has no right to complain) and “*Ghovan marlem ani pavsan bhizaiem, konak sangtale?*”²⁴ (Whom to tell if beaten by the husband and getting wet in the rain?) reflect this thinking. Infact the society did not encourage the third person to intervene in the fights of a husband and wife as attested from this proverb “*Gova bailechem ashem ani madim ulaita tem pixem*”²⁵ (It is madness to intervene in the fights of a husband and wife).

4. Sati or Widowhood :

The woman was completely depended on her husband and when he died she was expected by the society either to commit sati or live a life of a widow. Sati was a custom wherein the widow would burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. Those who committed sati were regarded as saints and also memorial stones were erected in their memory to be worshipped. The presence of these sati stones in Goa prove that sati too existed in Goa.

Even though this was a voluntary act sometimes the women were forced by their families to commit sati. Deep trenches were made around the pyre to ensure that the woman could not escape. The cries and screams of the widows were drowned by the beating of the drum. This can be attested both from the sati stones as well as the accounts of the foreign travellers of 14th and 15th Cen AD like Ibn Batuta, Tome Pires and Nicolo Conti.²⁶

Those women who chose to be alive had to live the miserable life of a widow. Widow re-marriage was not allowed. The widows have to shave their head and were termed as *bodki* infact *bodki* was the generic term for the widow.²⁷ From the following proverbs we come to know that the widows were termed as *bodki* since they shaved their head and didn't use any ornaments of a married life. “*Kenskarancho paar na thaim bodkank kon vicharta?*”²⁸ (Who asks after head shaven widow when those who have hair are not valued?), “*Bodkek kukum ani vazak katboll kiteak*”²⁹ (why does the head shaven widow want a vermilion and the barren wants the food to puerperal woman?) and “*Bhieun chaltam bailechim kanknnam rakhtam*”³⁰ (I live cautiously; I take care of the bangles of my wife).

Besides *bodki* widows were also termed as *rand*. The very fact that the word *rand* sounds like a badword and reflects ill feeling indicates to us the status of widows in Goan society in earlier times. Their very presence was considered to be inauspicious and hence they had to lead a secluded life as seen in this proverb “*Rand bail konxyant, ayav bail munxyant*”³¹ (A widow in a corner, a married woman among the people). They have to wear a white sari in order to

²⁰ Antonio Pereira, S.J, *Konkanni Oparinchem Bandar The Treasure of Konkani Proverbs* (Goa: Antonio Pereira, S.J, 1985), p. 120.

²¹ Ibid., 17., Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 117.

²² Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 70.

²³ Ibid., p. 111.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

²⁶ Sr. Emma Maria A.C., *Women in Portuguese Goa 1510-1835* (Tellicherry:IRISH, 2002), pp. 23-24.

²⁷ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994), p. 76.

²⁸ Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 82.

²⁹ Antonio Pereira, S.J, *Konkanni Oparinchem Bandar The Treasure of Konkani Proverbs* (Goa: Antonio Pereira, S.J, 1985), p. 93.

³⁰ Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 210, Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994), p. 76.

³¹ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994), p. 77. Sebastiao Rodolfo Dalgado, *Florilegio de Proverbios Concanis* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1922), p. 309.

make them less attractive and prevent them from marrying again. They were expected to spend their time praying, fasting or working in the kitchen.³²

To be a widow was the worst condition ever for the woman in her life as society was not at all sympathetic towards her. Widowhood was a miserable life that can befall a woman as reflected in the proverbs “*Aaz vakal faleam rand*”³³ (Today is bride tomorrow a widow), “*Aapun maran bailek rand karin*”³⁴ (To die and to make ones wife a widow). Everyone ill-treated her and didn’t show any respect as seen in these proverbs “*Aapun ailam magunk, ghalge rande bhik*”³⁵ (I have come to beg, give me something widow) and “*Galta zalear ghalge rande bhik, hanv pednecho bikari*”³⁶ (Oh widow if giving alms then give, I am a beggar from Pednem). In both these proverbs a beggar who is supposed to adopt a humble way of asking is insolent and begs in an offensive manner to a widow which shows the attitude of a society towards a widow.

The society was not acceptable to the remarriage of widows as reflected in the proverbs “*Xitak ek nistem, bailek ek ghov*”³⁷ (Only one fish for a rice similarly only one husband for a woman), “*Randek ghov tenklo, tacho modlo donko*”³⁸ (the husband touched the wife who was earlier a widow and he broke his leg), “*Randen ghetlo ghov, fulank padlo dukall*”³⁹ (The widow got married and there was scarcity of flowers) and “*Dhavya ghodyachi chakri karchi nay ani rand bailechi sangat karchi nay*”⁴⁰ (Never serve a white horse and never take the company of a widow). From the above proverbs it is quite clear that the remarriage of widows was considered to be inauspicious and laden with full of difficulties and hurdles for those persons who wished to marry them. Hence widows did not remarry.

5. Kalvants :

The information on position of women will be incomplete if we do not delve into *Devdasi* system. *Devdasi* literally means servant of God or the slave of God. In Goa the *devdasis* were known as *Kalavants*. The *kalavant* is derived from the word ‘Kala’ meaning art. The *kalavants* were the female artist or dancing girls who were referred by the Portuguese as *bailadeiras* or dancing girls. Some even called them *naikins*. They danced and sang in the temples. There was other group of women who were dedicated to the temples called *bavinas*. These girls have to perform many duties in the temple like cleaning the idols, carrying the earthen lamps and lightening them for worship. *Bavinas* did not dance in the temples.⁴¹

Of all these groups of women who were dedicated to temples, *Kalavants* were esteemed to be high as they had knowledge of reading, writing, dancing, vocal music and stitching.⁴² *Kalavants* were called by affluent families to dance at all public functions and weddings. The art of dancing is illustrated in the following *dekhni* or folk song wherein a *kalavant* begs the boatman to ferry her across the river;

“*Hanv saiba poltoddi vetam, Damulea lagnak vetam* (I am going across to the other side of river to attend Damu’s wedding)

Mhaka saiba vatu dakhoi, mhaka saiba vatu kolona (please show me the way as I don’t know the way)

Damulea mattvantu kolvontancho khellu (2) (In the wedding pandal of Damu *Kalvants* are performing)

Aga mhojea taria mama(2)⁴³ (Oh my boatman)

³² Fatima da Silva Gracias, *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1994), p. 28.

³³ Antonio Pereira, S.J, *Konkanni Oparinchem Bandar The Treasure of Konkani Proverbs* (Goa: Antonio Pereira, S.J, 1985), p. 220.

³⁴ Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p. 43.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ V.P Chavan, *The Konkani Proverbs* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1923), p. 34.

³⁷ Sebastiao Rodolfo Dalgado, *Florilegio de Proverbios Concanis* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1922), p. 69.

³⁸ Antonio Pereira, S.J, *Konkanni Oparinchem Bandar The Treasure of Konkani Proverbs* (Goa: Antonio Pereira, S.J, 1985), p. 184.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁰ Sebastiao Rodolfo Dalgado, *Florilegio de Proverbios Concanis* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1922), p. 310.

⁴¹ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), p.83.

⁴² Sr. Emma Maria A.C., *Women in Portuguese Goa 1510-1835* (Tellicherry:IRISH, 2002), p. 28.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 29; C M Estibeiro, *A Garland of Mando Dulpods & Dekhni* (Panaji: Directorte of Art and Culture, 2002), p.58.

The references to *kalavnats* can be found in other folk songs also like “*Oyra oyra dongrar udoku kongrem, udok kongrem zalear kolvontu mogrem*”⁴⁴ (up in the mountains the water curls, if water curls then the *kalvant* is jasmine), *Damulea mattvantu, muzgu vazota, Muzgachea sadar, kolvontu nachota*”⁴⁵ (Music is played in the wedding pandal of Damu, *kalvant* is swaying to the tune of music) “*Ami Kalavantam*”⁴⁶(We *Kalvants*) etc. Towards the later period the *Kalavants* degenerated into prostitutes.

The society much appreciated their art of dancing and accepted them. They were even maintained by the village gauncars while managing the temples. Though the society accepted *Kalavants*, the other women were looked down upon if they danced in the public as can be seen from the proverb “*Bail nachli, loz vagddaili*”⁴⁷ (A woman who danced in public lost her reputation). It was believed that dancing in the public was fit for *Kalavants* and no one else should indulge in that. The following proverbs explains this situation “*Kalvant nachta devlant mhunun gavdi nachta garant*”⁴⁸(Since dancing girl is dancing in the temple, labourer’s wife too is dancing in the house) and “*Kalvant nachta mhun geli nachunk Jokin, ti padli sarvangim ghuspun*”⁴⁹(Since dancing girl was dancing, Joaquina too went to dance but she got herself entangled and plopped on the floor).

The presence of *Kalavants* was more in Ponda taluka probably because the former taluka was part of new conquest and policy of conversion was not followed in the new conquest talukas. Also there were lots of temples in that taluka.

6. Education :

On the educational front the women didn’t receive any formal education as such. Even the references that we find of royal queens establishing agraharas clearly show that these agraharas were not meant for women as the subjects taught in these agraharas were vedas, vedangas which women were not supposed to learn.

The women were infact ridiculed on their intellect and were not considered fit for decision making. This can be gathered from the following Konkani proverbs “*Bailank ordea gaddvachem ginean*”⁵⁰(The women have the brain of half a donkey), “*Bail mhunshyank dhomptra sokoil budh*”⁵¹(women’s wisdom is below the knee), “*Bail davea paianchi vhan*”⁵²(The women is left foot’s sandal), “*baileche budhik bhullo, gharcho bagasatal kelo*”⁵³(the husband was bewitched with the advice of the wife and the house was in ruins). The women were considered fit only for household chores and the place best fit for them was kitchen. This can be seen from the following proverbs; “*Bailechem shannepann chulikaden*”/ “*Bailamli vidya ranni pallant*”⁵⁴(Women’s wisdom is near the kitchen).

7. Conclusion :

On the whole the women in pre Portuguese Goan society enjoyed a discriminatory position in comparison to men. Their position was similar to that of all women in the rest of India. The situation changed a little with the establishment of the Portuguese rule though on a minuscule level.

Some parts of Goa were conquered by Afonso de Albuquerque in 1510. Soon after conquest he abolished the practice of Sati and allowed widow re-marriages. Whether he did this on humanitarian grounds or to meet the requirements for his policy of miscegenation or mixed marriages ie between local women and Portuguese men is debatable. As Europe too was familiar with practice of burning heretics alive so it’s not possible that he must have considered it as barbarian. And after his abolishing also there were cases of women committing sati as can be attested from sati stones of 16th century.

He gave the widows and daughters of the slain Muslims as well as the women of their harem in marriage to those Portuguese men who were willing to settle down in the new territory. These men were called as *Casados* and they were

⁴⁴ C M Estibeiro, *A Garland of Mando Dulpods & Dekhni* (Panaji: Directorte of Art and Culture, 2002), p.58.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fatima da Silva Gracias, *The Many faces of Sundorem Women in Goa* (Panjim: Surya Publications, 2007), p. 48.

⁴⁷ Edward de Lima, *Konknni Oparincho Kox* (Porvorim: Vikram Publications, 2017), p. 334.

⁴⁸ Kamaladevi Rao Deshpande, *Mhanni Fatli Kani Vol I*(Margao:Asmitai Pratishitan, 1998), p. 73.

⁴⁹ Sebastiao Rodolfo Dalgado, *Florilegio de Proverbios Concanis* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1922), p. 125.

⁵⁰ Edward de Lima, *Konknni Oparincho Kox* (Porvorim: Vikram Publications, 2017), p. 333.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 333.

⁵² Edward de Lima, *Konknni Oparincho Kox* (Porvorim: Vikram Publications, 2017), p. 336.

⁵³Manohar Pai Dhungat, *Konkani Mhanisagar* (Panaji: Goa Konkani Akademi, 2003), p.115.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 114-115.

given incentives in form of plots of land and houses to start a new life.⁵⁵ It was assumed by Albuquerque that the progeny from these marriages will be loyal to Portuguese crown. Also those women who were willing to convert themselves to Christianity were given few rights in property. So these were some initial steps towards the betterment of women's position but more was yet to come towards the latter part of Portuguese rule.

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⁵⁵ Sr. Emma Maria A.C., *Women in Portuguese Goa 1510-1835* (Tellicherry:IRISH, 2002), p.100.