
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ELEMENTS FOSTERED BY EARTHEN BUILDING PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS

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Abstract

On the west coast of the Indian peninsula, along the Arabian Sea, is India's smallest state - Goa. Goa's traditional architecture is mainly built with mud and/or laterite-stone. Like the rest of India and other parts of the world, many social, cultural, and religious beliefs and traditions are entwined in everyday Goan life - including its architecture. There are building materials that are considered sacred, ancient religious texts that refer to architecture, religious symbols built in and around houses, rituals and festivals performed at different stages of constructing a house. Of course, over time, some traditions and customs have evolved or even been lost.

As Goa was ruled by the Portuguese for 451 years i.e. 1510 - 1961, the Goan culture blends that of India and Europe, especially Portugal and its colonies. This is evident in its architecture, art, cuisine, music, religion, education, politics, etc. Interestingly, the religious conversions that took place during the Portuguese reign, mainly from tribal and Hindu to Catholic, saw various adaptations to cultural traditions - including those related to construction practices. Goan Catholics, while retaining certain aspects of their Hindu customs, adapted to suit their new ones. This research paper touches upon various architectural practices followed by Goan tribals, Hindus, and Christians, from ancient to current times.

Keywords: earth buildings, historic preservation, architecture, intangible and tangible heritage, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, Goa, India

1 Introduction

As in the rest of India, there was/is a tendency in Goa to associate various natural phenomena, sites, and elements, as well as certain objects, events, etc. with worship and religion. As many of these entities were from nature, such as rocks, trees, etc. early Goans were delicate in their approach towards the natural environment. Many of these beliefs have evolved from ancient traditions, and though the logic behind most has been forgotten today, recent research is proving that many of these practices are rooted in science.

Goan tribals worshipped the earth. Every morning, as soon as they woke up, they would say a little prayer to the **earth**, asking for forgiveness for stepping on her. In some communities, earth in the form of an anthill (“*santer*” in Konkani) was/is worshipped.^[1]

Earth was an integral part of the lives of early Goans. They used to apply mud to their bodies when taking a bath (mud therapy suggested by “Ayurvedic” science) and would walk barefoot on earthen floors.^[2] Earthen houses, fences, seats, etc. comprised villages that were entirely built with mud. Earth was also used to make cooking stoves, utensils, sacred idols, musical instruments, children’s toys, etc. As society progressed, earth houses and items continued to be used by people of all socio-economic strata.^[3]

2 The Hindus

The Hindu Vedic texts make reference to architecture. The “Maanava Shilpa” section in the “**Vastu Shastras**” texts discusses architectural guidelines for domestic dwellings, public buildings, village and town planning, etc.^[4]

Site selection: In the case of houses with Hindu owners, a priest called the “Bhat” is invited.^[5] He, along with a builder, decide the site, house orientation and access, auspicious dates to start construction, celebrate the inauguration, etc.^[6] The site is selected based on science and horoscope, which take into consideration the earth’s magnetic forces and five elements i.e. space, air, fire, water, and earth. The combination of these is believed to ensure that the house takes maximum benefit from nature’s forces — land, atmosphere, water, sun, and celestial forces; thus ensuring health, wealth, and prosperity of those who live in it. Below are some aspects that are taken into consideration when selecting a construction site.^[7]

- **Site and its vicinity:** Crematoriums, burial grounds, pastures, and grazing areas are avoided. Trees with long roots have to be absent as they could come in the way of construction. A fertile land with a water source nearby is also essential.
- **Soil:** It is ensured that it is not black, clayey (to prevent landslides), marshy, or saline. A bad odor is considered a limitation as well. The soil is also tested for its load-bearing capacity.

1 Khedekar, Goa: Land, Life and Legacy, p.115

2 Ibid., p.33,121

3 Lobo, Earth in Architecture, p.36

4 Silveira, Lived Heritage, Shared Space: The Courtyard House of Goa, p.22

5 Pandit, Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa, p.105

6 Silveira, Lived Heritage, Shared Space: The Courtyard House of Goa, p.23

7 Silveira, Lived Heritage, Shared Space: The Courtyard House of Goa, p.23-24

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- **Orientation:** The main openings of the house are directed towards the southwest to allow maximum natural light. As per “Vastu” principles, the plot has to be square or rectangular. The sides of the rectangle should measure 1:2 in their proportions, with the north and south sides being shorter. If all the corners do not angle at 90°, the distance between the southwest and northeast corners should be longer than the southeast and northwest corners.

Before the construction or completion of the house, a ritual called the “**Grihashanti puja**” is held. This is meant to ward off any evil eye or negative forces that might come in the way of the construction and upkeep of the house. It is a prayer to welcome positive energy into the house and lives of its inhabitants. As per the ritual proceedings, a coconut is tied to the roof’s truss, and then the truss is mounted. The owner then goes and presents a cash gift to the masons and carpenters (both were referred to as “*mestre*,”^[8] “*maestre*,”^[9] “*mistri*,”^[10] “*meste*”^[11] in Konkani), who would be standing outside the house. (Before this, the owner paid the master craftsmen in kind only. Exchange of cash started with this ritual.) However, the monetary value of the gift is of little importance to the craftsmen. It is rather a moment of pride for them as their names would be associated with the house, and the owner’s family would honor them.^[12] On completion of the house, an inauguration ceremony called “**Grihapravesha**” is performed.^[13]

3 The Catholics

Saint Thomas (“*São Thomé*”) is believed to be the **patron saint of Goan masons and carpenters**. An apostle of Jesus, he landed in the Indian state of Kerela and is well known in the country for spreading Christianity. It is believed that on his arrival, he was sold as a carpenter. Legend has it that a king asked Thomas to draw plans for his palace and was then entrusted with the task of building the palace. While the king was away, Thomas distributed the king’s wealth, including wood, stones, etc. to the poor, and the palace was never built. On the king’s return, Thomas told the king that there is a bigger palace waiting for him in heaven. The king was enraged and chained Thomas. However, he then fell ill and died. It is believed that the king saw his palace in heaven and came back to earth to reward Thomas with material wealth as well as the power to change people’s lives. The higher class envied Thomas for his gifts and finally martyred him.

In Christian iconography, Saint Thomas is depicted as a man with white hair and beard, dressed in robes and a cloak. In his left hand is an object that looks like a lance. The early converts thought of it as a pickaxe, and thus he became the patron saint of masons and carpenters. However, it is only in India

8 Pandit, *Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa*, p.88,94

9 *Ibid.*, p.89

10 *Ibid.*, p.94

11 *Ibid.*, p.111

12 *Ibid.*, p.132

13 Silveira, *Lived Heritage, Shared Space: The Courtyard House of Goa*, p.23



Figure 1. St. Thomas Chapel, Panaji, North Goa. [Source: Facebook, Goa – Then & Now, April 1, 2016] (accessed November 11, 2019]



Figure 2 & 3. Date of construction engraved on the truss of a house. Colva, Salcete, South Goa, 2014. [Photo credits: Chenelle Rodrigues]

that Saint Thomas holds this title. (In Portugal, Saint Joseph is accepted as the patron saint of builders, though this might be a recent title). In the capital city of Goa, Panaji, there is a chapel dedicated to St Thomas. It was first built by the Goan masons in 1845 in front of Rua de Avril and then broken down and rebuilt in 1849 at Tobacco Square. The masons also managed the chapel administration.^[14] Saint Thomas chapel can today be seen at Rua São Tomé near the post office in Patto, Panaji.

Another study (Pandit et al., *Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa*, 2003) recounts that before Carpenter Zuzé Sequeira would start the roof work, he would carve a small Christian cross on a wooden beam or rafter and worship it with candles and flowers. He would then engrave the commencement date on one of the beams. It must be noted that he was the only carpenter among the ones interviewed for that study that reported to have practiced this ritual.^[15] This ritual could correspond to the Hindu “Grihashanti puja.”

14 Pandit, *Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa*, p.110-111

15 Pandit, *Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa*, p.130

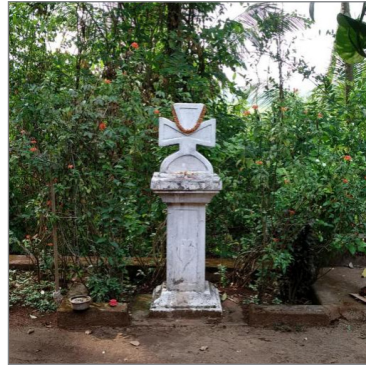


Figure 4. “Tulsi vrindavan” built with earth.

Figure 5. “Cross”.

[Photo credits: Chenelle Rodrigues]

4 Hindus and Catholics

Foundation of the house: (“*bunyad*” in Konkani) Mason Bapu Shabi Gadaka, in his late 60s (2019), from Oxelbag in Dhargalim VP of Pernem district, spoke about Hindu and Christian rituals with regards to laying the house’s foundation. In a Hindu house, the first stone laid is engraved with a “swastika,” and the “bhat” recites prayers. “Panchadhatu” i.e. five metals such as copper (“*thambé*” in Konkani), brass, zinc (“*pintal*”), steel, silver (“*channi*”), gold (“*bhangar*”), wire, etc. are offered to God along with some moss (locally referred to as “*showko*”) collected from the neighboring pond. The ceremony takes about 1-2 hours.

The Catholics engrave the foundation stone with a cross. A priest say prayers, and a small cross made from gold is buried at the construction site during the ritual.

Orientation of the alter or “devaghor”: (The latter is a Konkani word and literally translates to “House of God”.) Most, if not all Indian houses, irrespective of religion, have a dedicated place for worship i.e. an altar or a room. In the case of a Goan Hindu house, a “bhat” would decide the position of the altar/“devaghor”/temple. He would choose the east or south-east orientation.

As for the Catholics, a priest would lead. He would direct the alter/“devaghor”/chapel to be built facing the village church, neighborhood chapel, or cross station.

From then on, master masons, irrespective of religion, would take over. They referred to the decided side/orientation as “the right side” (“*uzvi kode*” in Konkani).^[16]

Religious symbols: The courtyard of a Hindu house is ordained with a “tulsi vrindavan” i.e. a stone-masonry or mud post, in which the sacred “tulsi” plant is planted.^[17] In Catholic houses, a “cross” is often seen instead. It is not uncommon to see posts for crosses that resemble the “tulsi vrindavan.”

16 Pandit, Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa, p.105

17 Rangel-Ribeiro, ed., Goa Aparanta – Land Beyond the End, p.94

Use of cow dung: (cow dung is called “shen” in Konkani) There are traditional houses of both Hindus and Christians where floors are covered with cow dung. In some regions, walls are also covered with the same. The cow is considered sacred in the Hindu religion. The practice of using cow dung in house construction could have a religious significance or could be because of the ease of availability.

Whether some or all of these rituals are practiced in modern Goan society depends on whether a certain community and family chooses to follow them.

5 Conclusion

We see that while there are some sets of beliefs that may be exclusive to the Hindu or Catholic faith, there are others that could be considered shared between the two communities. This could be because most Goan Christians are Hindu converts, have adapted their Hindu beliefs to suit Christianity, and/or their Christian faith coincides in certain aspects with their previous Hindu faith. It could also be because of practical reasons such as topography, geographical conditions, availability of building materials, etc.

This paper is an outcome of my Post-master’s DSA - Earthen Architecture and Heritage dissertation titled, “Comparison of the vernacular earthen architecture in Goa (past Portuguese colony in India) and Alentejo (Portugal): Local building cultures and conservation approaches.” from CRAterre at l’École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Grenoble - France.

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