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# FROM WARDS & VADDOS

Ground Reports Telling Stories That Matter



O HERALDO

## A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF GOA

In our continuous efforts to put people at the center of our journalism, we bring to you a weekly collection of stories, specially curated from our ground-level reportage which celebrates the joys, and shares the sorrows of people in their grassroots. These are, at heart, very simple stories, simply told. Interesting initiatives, out-of-the-box thinking, dogged persistence on any issue, and the struggles of people over the years as they try and put their disrupted lives back together are not just news stories.

Each is a document from the wards and vaddos of Goa, a postcard, a letter, a share. This collection is brought to you from O Heraldo's team of reporters who have been given one simple mandate - go out, travel, and speak to people about their lives.

From Wards and Vaddos is as much your project as O Heraldo's and we welcome all of you on this journey into the heart of Goa.

Pls email editor@herald-go.com or reach us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

# The golden touch: Aakashy Purke's entrepreneurial spirit transforms Sangolda's farming scene

In an era where youth aspire to bag white-collar jobs, the Purke siblings Aakashy and Bindiya from Sangolda, choose to toil in the soil to make a living. The family, headed by the patriarch Pramod Purke are agriculturists by trade, and are the first in Sangolda to grow yellow watermelons

GISELLE REGINA FERNANDES



**SIOLIM:** Aakashy fell in love with the land, having worked in the fields with his father from a young age. When they were kids, Aakashy and his sister Bindiya would follow their father Pramod to tend to the 35 jersey cows they owned. The kids were involved in milking the cows, feeding them, and even cleaning the stables. They would collect the cow dung and cow urine in waste baskets, and walk two kilometres with them, to fertilise the field. Messy as these jobs were, the kids would promptly return home, have a quick shower and then head off to school in Monte Guirim. After school, it was lunch at home with the parents before the entire family would again head to work in the fields, where they would plant, nurture and harvest crops. In the early days, the family

didn't make enough to pay daily labourer's wages, so it was all hands on deck to cultivate the one-acre field together and make ends meet. Watching their dedication and hard work, their neighbours leased the family a field of four more acres for them to cultivate. Slowly but surely, the family started to earn a little bit of extra revenue and shared part of the produce with the owners of the land.

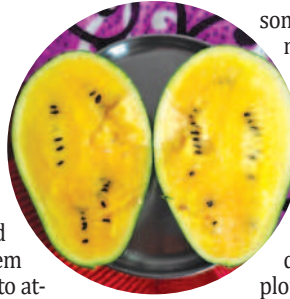
Despite completing his education and getting a Diploma in Agriculture, Aakashy found it difficult to find a job. But instead of idling his life away, Aakashy decided to go back to what he knew, but was also keen on exploring some new avenues. He purchased yellow watermelon seeds online and planted them, excited to grow this exotic looking fruit.

He was the only youth in Sangolda to grow and market this rare golden watermelon variety. Unfortunately, in the early days people were wary of this odd-looking melon, so he faced difficulty in selling the produce. Undeterred, Aakashy decided to try differ-

ent markets and drove his produce to Panjim, Porvorim, Calangute and Taleigao, even selling them alongside the highways to attract customers.

His efforts paid off and customers often stopped by, curious to try this exotic yellow watermelon. Spurred on by this success, Aakashy dabbled in other produce like broccoli, okra (bhindi), bitter gourd, bottle gourd (calabash) and local chillies, always supported by his sister and fellow farming enthusiast Bindiya. "Besides all our agricultural produce, we also prepare organic concoctions like Jiva Amrut and Panchya Gavya using cow urine and dung, which are full of nutrients for fertilising the fields," says Bindiya. Since then, Aakashy and his father have purchased three tractors and cultivated around 100 acres of land for farmers in Sangolda, Porvorim, Guirim and Saligao.

When Aakashy tried getting a job as tractor driver with the Agriculture Department a few years ago, he was turned down. "It was probably given to



someone with political connections, and I had none," Aakashy says. But he says he has no regrets, because the people in Sangolda who have worked with Aakashy, vouch for him, saying that he's one of the best tractor drivers around and that he ploughs the fields very well.

The biggest difficulty for Aakashy was procuring water for his fields. Despite having the Tillari irrigation pipeline passing through their field, there was not a drop of water that they could use. Aakashy took it upon himself to source water from his own well amongst various other sources and managed to collect about 4,000 litres every day from different places, so that his crops would survive.

Now in his mid-twenties, Aakashy is used to working hard, and he enjoys experimenting with a wide variety of produce. "Goa is now becoming completely dependent on neighbouring States for their fruits and vegetables. Gone are the days that everything was sourced locally, and farm to table was the norm," he says. He fears that if there's another pandemic where the borders are closed, this dependency on other states will bring Goa to a standstill.



He rues the fact that every day, more and more agricultural land is being converted by landfilling, and that construction and concrete structures are taking over what once were rich fertile fields. "Those blessed to receive agricultural land from their ancestors, should cultivate them and save these lands to ensure a better future for the generations to come," Aakashy says earnestly.

He urges the government to stop this conversion of agricultural land to other commercial properties. "The government should encourage youth to cultivate the land by providing subsidies so that the agricultural industry becomes profitable, and Goa becomes more self-sustained at the same time," he says. Akshay owes much of his success to the help that is rendered by Mapusa Zao Sampatti Dargalkar.

## Art meets activism: Painting a future for Goa's wildlife

Siolim's Aaron Fernandes is a passionate wildlife rescuer and rehabilitator, a skill gained through hands-on experience and guidance from renowned herpetologists across the country

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**SIOLIM:** Aaron Victor Emidio Fernandes, a talented artist from Siolim, Goa, has been passionate about wildlife since his school days. As a young boy in Class IV at Saint Britto's in Mapusa, he



was inspired by his vice-principal Fr Joachim Marian D'Mello, who shared his enthusiasm for snakes and reptiles. Since then, Aaron has been a champion for wildlife in distress, attending to calls at any time of the day or night, saving the lives of countless creatures that fall victim to man's mindless destruction of their natural habitats. From rescuing orphaned baby monkeys from the arms of their mothers killed by speeding vehicles, to rehabilitating injured civet cats and porcupines, to helping various other reptiles caught in sticky situations, Aaron's big-heartedness has made him a household name in Siolim.

Aaron recalls his foray into the field, at the Goa College of Arts, where many of his seniors were part of a wildlife rescue organisation. His friend Nirmal Kulkarni introduced him to this space, and he soon joined the cause. "In the early 2000s, educating people about coexisting with wildlife was challenging due to a lack of awareness. However, with social media, spreading awareness has become much simpler," he says.

Today, at 39 years old, Aaron and his team conduct "snake talks" in schools, educating students aged 10-14 about snake identification, do's and don'ts in case of a snake bite, and debunking myths associated with reptiles. "The goal is to

We share this planet, we don't own it. We are visiting; we haven't bought it. We don't need wider roads, we need bigger hearts, more open minds and a greater love for nature. We need to re-think our 'development' and become human again

Aaron Fernandes

reduce the fear of snakes among young people. Earlier, live snake demonstrations were part of these sessions, but the focus shifted to the thrill of holding the snake rather than the intended message," he says. Now, the team ensures that the snake demonstration is towards the end of the session to maintain students' undivided attention.

Besides classroom sessions, Aaron and his team organise overnight camping trips to forests, giving students an immersive wildlife experience. Instead of bringing reptiles to the classroom, youngsters get to go into the forest to observe them in their natural habitat.

When rescuing injured wild animals, Aaron transports them in his personal vehicle to his veterinarian friends for medical attention. He then nurses them back to health at his home in Siolim, which is always full of the chatter of recuperating monkeys and langurs. Once they

are strong enough to fend for themselves, he releases them in a location closest to where they were found, ensuring minimal displacement from their original habitat.

Aaron emphasises that animal displacement and human-wildlife conflicts are often caused by merciless tree cutting and unplanned development, leading to the destruction of flora and fauna. In an appeal to rescuers across the country, Aaron says, "Every animal caught is not a rescue. Understand the nuances between people's fears and actually displacing an animal from its habitat." He also highlights that deaths due to snake bites in India account for half of the global total, often due to occupational hazards - mostly farmers and rescuers handling reptiles poorly. Annually, a significant portion of the world's population gets bitten and dies from reptile bites, but the data doesn't distinguish between occupational-related bites and those sustained from attempts at bravado, he points out.

When it comes to his artwork, Aaron's creations are characterised by psychedelic patterns and pointillism techniques in shades of black and grey on a white background, creating captivating images using dots. "My works revolve around pattern recognition," he explains, adding that he works on various surfaces like canvas, walls, paper and even skin - he is also a skilled tattoo artist.

## Neil D'Cruz is strumming his own legacy, one chord at a time

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**CARMONA:** Neil D'Cruz, 45, a self-taught musician, is sharing his musical talent with a whole generation of young Goans. He is a music teacher to 150 kids and a few adults, as he believes learning how to sing and play has no age limit and practice makes perfect. He is also the founder and lead singer of the band Altitude. "This lets me do what I love, spend enough time with my family, sing to people, and shape the budding musicians of Goa," he adds. All of his band members are employed at the music school, teaching instruments to kids. Neil is also a vocal coach, honing talents and voices to sound melodious.

Harking back to his foray into the industry, Neil's parents were avid music lovers. As a young boy, Neil remembers his eyes widening with wonder as his father returned from the Gulf, his suitcase a treasure trove of Thomson cassettes featuring the Beatles, the Carpenters, ABBA, and every medley of '80s icons. "Even after my father went back to the Gulf, my mother would play those cassettes every day, and my two siblings and I would sing along," Neil recalls.

Today, Neil's house pulsates with the timeless anthems of rock and roll royalty. His children, Dwayne, 10, and Khloe, 8, are a big part of his life. Both kids sing, play instruments, and sometimes even perform on stage with their dad, making him prouder than ever. They have a page on instagram called 'KD and Daddy', where they jam and sing music covers together.

"We had a family friend, Jeffrey, who used to sing and play the guitar. That's when I became curious to try it, and once I did, there was no turning back," Neil shares with O Heraldo. Jeffrey taught him his first few chords, but Neil's journey is a tune of tenacity, a melody that began in the absence of any musical lineage.

With no family heirlooms of instruments or sheets of music passed down, he carved his path with makeshift strings and hand-me-down songbooks. His fingers learned the language of music through sheer will, pressing against the frets with the help of



Music is life. It transports you to a different place. It's been with me through highs and lows, and whether it's music or any other profession, if what you're doing is your passion, it will never feel like work

Neil D'Cruz

musicians around him. By the age of 18, Neil began singing from table to table, forming a trio with his sister and another member in a hotel. They were called 'The Serenaders.' After many stints with famous musicians of Goa, Neil began his career as a music teacher at Vidya Vikas Academy. After 14 years of service, he realised he wasn't able to give enough time to his family and didn't have the freedom to teach the way he liked. He believes children can be taught more easily if the process is made fun. "Children come to music class as a respite from academics, and hence they learn little to nothing in school. I wanted to teach them more than just a few chords, making it a fun process because if we teach them 'do re mi' all the time, they lose interest," Neil chuckles.

He tries to make music as fun as possible for his students by teaching them the current songs they are interested in. Hence, he started Uncut Diamonds a year ago as a platform for young musicians to showcase their talent. He has reached more than 150 students, who not only receive vocal training and learn to play the guitar, keyboard, and drums but also learn things like

conquering fear and performing with confidence on stage. "I have a 55-year-old man who comes to me for training," Neil says, reminding us that he is open to teaching not just kids, but anyone interested from Monday to Friday.

Neil recollects a time when he doubted his ability to make it in this world during one of his stints in Dubai, where a dear friend restored his confidence. Now, Neil is doing the same for the Goan community, hiring young musicians for his band and shaping the new generation.

Neil wanted to build a platform for children to showcase their talents because there wasn't one available. He has managed to put on four events, inviting parents and friends, with one event attracting as many as 3,000 people in the audience who came to watch these kids perform. "We had children of different ages performing, not just from my school but from around the state," he says.

On the other hand, Neil tries to create music for his audience as well, making original music. His band's goal is to create original music for the Goan audience.



## Strokes of devotion: The artistic journey of Maximo Coutinho

The story of Maximo Coutinho from Tropa-Sodiem is one of grit, determination, and the desire to carve a niche for himself

ERWIN FONSECA

**SIOLIM:** At every step, Maximo claims that he has emerged victorious over circumstances. "I didn't pursue much education; I had the urge to work and achieve something, so I decided to go to Dubai. As a young, enthusiastic boy, I tried my hand at various trades in Dubai because things were quite different back then. I must have been barely in my teens when I left for Dubai due to our family's circumstances and my desire to make something of myself," says Maximo. He spent about 10 years working in Dubai before feeling the pull of his homeland and returning to Goa. Despite having little savings, he took up small jobs in Goa to make ends meet. It was during this time that Maximo managed to buy a small plot of land and build a modest house, all costing just Rs 40,000, a considerable amount in the late seventies and early eighties. Once back in Goa, Maximo pursued different jobs, but his true breakthrough came when he developed an interest in painting statues and church altars. "I had no formal training or knowl-

edge; I simply began observing senior artists in the field and felt a calling towards it. Once I started, everything seemed to come naturally to me," informs Maximo. Gradually, he excelled in his craft, receiving requests from numerous priests to paint their altars, statues, and perform restoration work. Maximo travelled extensively across Goa, from one church to another, during his prime years, beautifying church interiors. "Communication wasn't as easy back then as it is now, yet priests preferred my work and eagerly awaited my arrival at their churches to enhance their sacred spaces," he reminisces.

Maximo wasn't just a painter but also a sculptor, moulding wood into religious figures before painting them. He would travel to various churches on his scooter to work on-site or, if needed, bring the statues to his home. "I found greater peace and ease working at home, en-

abling me to give my full attention to the statues. Sometimes, I would even bring home age-old statues for restoration," he shares.

Although Maximo had tried his hand at various jobs earlier, he never gained as much popularity as he did as a church artist and painter. "Many old statues were in need of painting and restoration, which I would diligently attend to. During that time, the quality of wood available was top-notch, making working with it a pleasure," he recalls.

With various artistic works of religious significance to his credit, including photos, wood carvings, and unique paintings, Maximo takes pride in his achievements. "There were only a handful of artists like me back then, and once a priest or church authority appreciated your work, they wouldn't let you go. That was my story too," he says. Maximo is gratified that many of his works have received recognition beyond India and garnered tremendous feedback. Despite being nearly 40 years into this reli-

