

GOA, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2025

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 Herald'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 Herald'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.

From corporate life to coconut farming, Rohan Nazareth's bold gamble pays off

Education is often seen as the key to success, broadening one's perspective and shaping identity, especially when combined with ambition and a clear goal. For Rohan Nazareth from Uccassaim in Bardez, education was just the beginning of a journey that would take him from the corporate world to full-time farming, transforming a 300+ coconut tree plantation in Mulgao, Bicholim, into a thriving sustainable enterprise

ERWIN FONSECA

MAPUSA: Coming from a well-respected family, his father being a renowned doctor, Rohan Nazareth completed his science degree and, with family support, pursued further education. Like many young professionals, he secured a high-paying corporate job, seemingly set for a comfortable life. But his heart remained tied to the family's coconut farm, a place he had visited since childhood with his father, who often took time off from his medical practice to tend to the land.

"Our coconut farm has always been special to me. I have childhood memories of visiting it with my dad, watching him relax and engage in farm work. I always dreamed of carrying that legacy forward," Rohan recalls.

But his journey was not just about following tradition—it was a conscious decision to build something meaningful, to create a self-sustaining business without relying on family wealth or government subsidies. While many in his position might have invested in real estate, tourism, or hospitality for quick profits, Rohan took a different route. He tightened his budget, cut unnecessary expenses, and meticulously saved money while still working in the corporate sector.

"It wasn't easy," he admits. "I didn't want to depend on my family's resources or seek subsidies. My goal was to raise my own funds, so I started planning and saving. After years of preparation, I finally had enough to take the plunge. I quit my job and committed myself fully to coconut farming."

Armed with determination and research, Rohan invested in high-end machinery,

spending lakhs to modernise his farm. But he didn't stop at traditional coconut oil extraction. He pioneered a unique process called HEAL (Hot Extraction Antioxidant Laden) to produce high-quality virgin coconut oil, a method he has since patented.

"Our ancestors extracted oil using wooden cold-press techniques, but virgin coconut oil is a new concept. It retains the natural goodness of coconut, and my father, being a doctor, always believed in its health benefits. I wanted to take this knowledge forward and ensure that coconut trees in Goa continue to be valued and preserved."

Over the last five years, Rohan has dedicated himself entirely to farming. In addition to coconut cultivation and oil extraction, he has expanded his farm to include pepper plantations. His vision goes beyond agriculture—he has turned his farm into an educational hub. Schoolchildren, agriculture enthusiasts, and visitors can experience traditional Goan farming, participate in guided tours, and enjoy farm-to-table meals prepared with fresh, organic produce.

His farm is not just a business; it's a living example of sustainable practices. Visitors are served meals in a thatched, cow-dung hut, using leaf plates that are later composted. Waste is minimized, and leftover food is repurposed rather than discarded.

"We educate people about food sustainability. Many in India struggle to get a single meal, while others waste food without a second thought. At my farm, we teach visitors to respect food and nature," he says.

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—Rohan Nazareth

Beyond the farm, Rohan also takes pride in showcasing the beauty and heritage of Mulgao, a village steeped in history. His farm, surrounded by a flowing stream and an ancient temple, offers a glimpse into Goa's past—a time of peace, self-sufficiency, and close ties to nature.

"This village is special. We have a natural spring, clean surroundings, and a way of life that reflects Goa's old-world charm. I wanted to encapsulate that in my farm—to offer an experience that reminds people of how simple and beautiful life once was," explains Rohan.

Despite his success, Rohan sees his journey as far from over. At just over 40 years old, he remains driven to push his farm to greater heights, proving that agriculture can be both fulfilling and profitable.

"My goal is not just personal success but to inspire Goan youth. Many see farming as non-lucrative, but I want to change that mindset. If done right, with passion and innovation, farming can be one of the most rewarding careers," he says.

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PANJIM: Cecille Rodrigues has never been one to sit quietly on the sidelines. Whether she's protesting the filling of fields in Taleigao, rallying to save trees from the axe, or painting unmarked speed breakers across Goa, she has built a reputation as a bit of a rabble-rouser, unafraid to take a stand.

But while fighting for a better, safer Goa is at the core of who she is, Cecille has also spent her life proving that dance is more than just an art form—it's a force for transformation. Along with a team of passionate dance instructors, she now teaches thousands of children through school collaborations, ensuring they receive the opportunities she never had growing up.

Cecille's love for dance began early. Unlike today, where tutorials are just a click away, she learned by mimicking moves from songs on Doordarshan. In school, she formed "Scorpions"—Goa's first all-girls dance troupe—at a time when dance wasn't considered a serious pursuit, especially for young girls.

People told my parents to stop me from dancing and make me focus on studies," she recalls. But her father stood by her, allowing her to pursue her passion. His support opened doors, leading her to represent India at the Lusofonia Games in Macau in the 1990s.

After marriage, Cecille took another leap—auditioning for Dance India Dance Season 2 in 2009. She made it to Mumbai but was eliminated just before the televised rounds. Instead of giving up, she found another path. Shortly after, she focused on family and welcomed her son in 2010. While balancing motherhood, she found a new way to stay connected to dance—as a fitness instructor. Dancing not only helped her shed pregnancy weight but also reignited her passion. Encouraged by friends, she returned



HELPING CHILDREN OVERCOME THEIR FEARS

More than just teaching steps, Cecille and her team help children develop life skills - confidence, focus, discipline and communication. Anup, who now manages Encore, recalls his own struggles— "Growing up, I had an awful stammer and was afraid to speak in class. My confidence was very low, and I got bullied into silence for my stammer. Being on stage, or speaking into a mic was my worst nightmare," he recalls. Dance changed that for him. "A neighbour showed me a dance move that I could not do - but I went home and practised it and then, taught myself

more moves and realised how much I loved to dance," says Anup, who now speaks without a stammer and feels at home on stage. Dancing with friends in college built his confidence, pushed him to communicate, and ultimately helped him overcome his fears. He now uses the same approach to help shy students break out of their shells.

"One girl at Fatima School was too shy to even try dancing - she did not want to be a part of the class. By the end of the year, she performed a solo. That's the transformation we aim for," he says.

to the stage in 2012, this time as part of a dance troupe. "I would travel from Taleigao to Anjuna for rehearsals, and gradually regained my flexibility and strength," she recalls.

Soon after, she won a reality show, with Goans rallying behind her. When she competed in Supermoms Season 1, her son was just two-and-a-half years old. Winning the show brought her back into the spotlight, but then came the big question—what next?

The answer arrived when Fr Avin Carvalho from Don Bosco, Panjim, invited her to teach dance to his students, many of whom were lethargic and disengaged. The experiment was a success, and soon, Cecille began teaching across multiple schools.

"The results were extraordinary—students eagerly waited for their weekly classes, refusing to miss them even when sick. Schools recorded full attendance on dance class days," she says gleefully.

Recognising the need

to expand dance education to reach many more kids, she co-founded Encore Academy of Performing Arts three years ago with her friend and fellow dance enthusiast, Francis Coelho. Their goal was simple—promote dance beyond just performance and make it an accessible career option. To ensure the academy continued running while she stepped into politics, she brought in young dancer Anup Arolkar to manage operations.

Encore now has a team of eight. The academy focuses on training instructors, ensuring they not only master choreography but also learn how to communicate effectively. Many instructors

start training between ages 16 to 18 and are fully appointed by 18. "We encourage our young trainers to continue their studies through correspondence, so they have academic qualifications alongside their dance careers," adds Cecille.

Cecille and her team are also working to shift cultural perceptions about dance. While the Goa government heavily promotes classical forms, western dance is still under-represented. "We need a balance," she says. "All children have different gifts and interests, and some of them may not be great at academics but have other talents that need to be identified and honed," she says. By integrating dance into school curricula at a nominal fee, Encore ensures that children from all backgrounds can participate. "Schools are the ideal place to integrate dance into a child's life, especially since many parents lack the time or resources for private classes," she adds. Today, Encore runs dance programmes in 30 schools across Goa, with a special focus on government-aided schools.

"Through dance, we help shy students express themselves, make them shout, move, and break free from their inhibitions. Watching children blossom from timid to self-assured and confident is what drives us every day. The love, smiles and hugs they give us during our sessions together are added perks," she says.



Handwoven heritage: Laxmi Velip keeps the dying art of Mandri mats alive in Quepem

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QUEPEM: In an era where modern comforts and mass-produced goods dominate the market, Laxmi Narayan Velip, a resident of Quepem, is preserving a centuries-old Goan tradition—the art of weaving Mandri, the handmade coconut leaf mat. Having dedicated over six decades to this craft, she continues to uphold a legacy that her family has nurtured for more than a century.

Velip's daily routine revolves around the painstaking process of weaving Mandri, a craft that requires both patience and skill. The process begins with sourcing coconut leaves, which are then stripped, dried, and meticulously woven together. The midrib of the leaf is removed, and strips are carefully arranged before being secured using the bark of a special tree found in the forest. It takes her at least 15 days of dedicated effort to complete a single mat, working long hours each day.

Despite the arduous nature of the work, Velip takes immense pride in her craft. However, she worries that the younger generation has little interest in learning or preserving this traditional skill. "I invite people to come

and learn, but they always say they are busy. They are more fascinated with today's gadgets," she laments.

For generations, the Mandri served as an essential household item in Goan homes, offering a natural and breathable surface to sleep on, especially during the hot and humid months. But with the advent of luxury mattresses, air-conditioned rooms, and plastic alternatives, the demand for these traditional mats has dwindled. "People want everything that looks fancy, even if it is less durable," Velip says, adding that many consider these mats unsuitable for modern homes and apartments.

Despite this shift, she remains committed to her craft, continuing to weave Mandri and sell them at local markets. "Some people appreciate our work, but

“One of my greatest concerns is that people no longer recognize the value of traditional crafts. Many admire the Mandri when they see it on display, but they hesitate to purchase it because they are unaware of its cultural significance. Parents have failed to pass down these traditions, and as a result, younger generations remain oblivious to their heritage. Children should learn how to weave mats and engage in traditional crafts, for these are vital aspects of our culture.”
—Laxmi Narayan Velip

they don't buy the mats because they don't understand their value. If parents don't pass down this knowledge, how will the next generation appreciate our heritage?" she asks.

The dwindling interest in traditional weaving is part of a larger cultural shift that Velip has observed over the years. She recalls a time when families sustained themselves with simple incomes from farming and handicrafts. "My work is not limited to weaving Mandri; I also take on farm labor when called upon. We often travel long distances with our food packed for the day and return home in the evening. In the past,

we sustained our families through the income generated from selling Mandri. I recall a time when daily wages were as low as seventy-five paise to five rupees, yet we managed our households efficiently. I still remember the joy of purchasing a saree for just six rupees," she recalls.

Despite the physical strain involved in weaving, Velip remains dedicated to her work, often spending hours on the floor, enduring back pain, just to complete a mat. "After a long day of work, I still sit down to weave because it is not just a mat—it is my identity, my pride," she says.

She hopes that more Goans will recognize the importance of preserving their cultural heritage. "Every Goan household should have at least one traditional item on display, as a reminder of who we are and where we come from."

As the world moves at an increasingly fast pace, Velip remains determined to keep this fading art alive for as long as she can.

