

GOA, MONDAY, MARCH 3, 2025

CLIMBING FOR A LIVING:

Coconut tree whisperer Babani Redkar takes pride in his family legacy

While the modern world moves toward automation and urban professions, Babani Redkar remains rooted in tradition, ensuring that the heritage of Goa's coconut farmers is not forgotten

JENIFER FERNANDES
joseph@herald-go.com

ALDONA: For Babani Redkar, a traditional farmer and skilled coconut plucker, clambering up trees is a craft passed down through generations. A resident of Quitla in Aldona, Redkar has spent years tending to coconut trees, offering not just his expertise in harvesting but also guidance on maintaining healthy crops.

Growing up in a family of farmers, Redkar learned the art of climbing coconut trees from his grandfather. "I watched him closely and imitated his techniques. Back then, we used only a rope and a chopper to scale the trees," he recalls. Today, after years of experience, he uses a mechanised climbing device, making the job safer and more efficient. Trained in Old Goa, he has been using this equipment for the past nine years, allowing him to work across multiple villages beyond his own.

While many know Redkar for his skill in plucking coconuts, he is often sought out for advice on coconut tree health and yield improvement. "Before I climb, I assess whether the coconuts are ready for harvesting. Many people also ask why their trees are producing fewer coconuts than before. I always tell them—coconut trees, like humans, need proper care, nourishment, and water to thrive."

“Before I climb, I assess whether the coconuts are ready for harvesting. Many people also ask why their trees are producing fewer coconuts than before. I always tell them—coconut trees, like humans, need proper care, nourishment, and water to thrive”
-Babani Redkar



specifically for coconut trees, and watering before the monsoon is essential. Many trees today suffer from diseases that cause coconuts to fall before they mature. Regular care can prevent this.

As a professional coconut plucker, Redkar follows a careful process when harvesting. "Mature coconuts turn reddish, while the immature ones remain green. I always inform tree owners about which ones should be plucked. Some insist on clearing the entire tree before the monsoon, but indiscriminate cutting of leaves and premature harvesting can impact future production." Despite the importance of his work, Redkar is concerned about the future of coconut plucking in Goa. "Younger generations are not interested in this profession. Farming and traditional occupations are being neglected. If this continues, Goans will soon have to depend on migrant workers for such jobs."

For Redkar, coconut plucking and farming are not just jobs but a source of pride. "People think office work is the only respectable profession, but I believe a farmer is the greatest person in Goa. This work has provided for my family, and I have no regrets."

Having studied only up to the fifth standard due to financial constraints, Redkar dedicated himself to farming and ploughing fields with oxen, a tradition his family followed for generations. Today, he urges young Goans to learn the art of coconut plucking. "Training is available in Old Goa. This profession gives you independence—you are your own boss. If more people take it up, we can preserve this Goan tradition instead of losing it to outsiders."

While the modern world moves toward automation and urban professions, Babani Redkar remains rooted in tradition, ensuring that the legacy of Goa's coconut farmers is not forgotten.



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 words and vaddos of Goa, a postcard, a letter, a share. This collection is brought to you from O Herald's team of report-

ers 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.

Xavier de Moira - the beat of the Konkani stage

For Xavier Minguel Fernandes —Paklo—the beat goes on, not just in his drums but in the hearts of those he has inspired. His rhythm is not just a sound; it is the pulse of Goa's enduring musical soul

ERWIN FONSECA

MOIRA: No one is born a genius, but through perseverance and struggle, some rise to become legends in their own right. One such figure in Goa's rich musical tapestry is Xavier Minguel Fernandes from Attafondem, Moira—better known simply as Xavier de Moira, but most famously called "Paklo" on the Konkani stage.

Born in 1964 into a struggling family, Xavier's childhood was far from easy. Financial constraints forced him to abandon formal education after the seventh standard, a reality he openly acknowledges. "I must be frank in admitting that my education was only up to Std VII. Somehow, I could not pursue further education due to family compulsions," he says. However, fate had other plans, as his destiny was to be shaped not in classrooms but in the rhythms of music.

From a young age, Xavier found solace in beats, fashioning makeshift drums out of tin cans and playing them with sticks. "I would instinctively beat on anything I found, and it felt like I was born to do this," he recalls. His raw talent did not go unnoticed. One day, Salazar D'Sa, a renowned mouth organ artist of the time, happened to hear the young Xavier's drumming and saw potential. "He stopped and asked me if I'd join him in playing for celebrations and All India Radio. I instantly agreed—it was a big break for me," Xavier recounts.

Xavier first performed as a drummer in 1980 at the age of 16. Six years later, in 1986, he played for All India Radio, marking a significant milestone in his career. "I consider myself lucky because that was the year Pope St. John Paul II visited Goa. Unlike today, where everything is broadcasted instantly, back then, people relied heavily on All India Radio for information. It was a huge blessing

“Talent must be realised and exhibited, not hidden. Today, I am known as a drummer, but it all began with tin cans. If one has to shine, one must struggle first. That's what I teach my students”
-Xavier de Moira

for me to start performing on such a grand platform at that time."

Xavier's stage name, 'Paklo' was humorously bestowed upon him by Aniceto from Santa Cruz, a common practice in Konkani theatre, where performers often receive nicknames that stick for life. Over the years, he collaborated with legendary music directors such as Ambrosio D'Souza, Agnelo Dias, Sebastian Araujo, Jose Cota, Antonio D'Souza, and Fr. Martin Fernandes.

Working with Xavier became a rite of passage for Konkani actors and musicians. "There is no Konkani stage actor or music composer who has not worked with Paklo," he says with pride. His performances extended beyond tiatros, playing for weddings, funerals, anni-



saries, birthdays, Carnival shows, feast bands, and even the traditional Roce ceremony.

Despite his success, Xavier nearly walked away from drumming early in his career. During one performance, overwhelmed by the presence of senior tiatr stalwarts, he lost rhythm on the drums. "The audience began mocking me. At the interval, I sat in a corner, deeply depressed, convinced that I should quit."

It was ace comedian Jacinto Vaz who changed the course of Xavier's life. "Jacinto Vaz came to me and asked what was wrong. I told him I wanted to quit. He smiled and said, 'Don't worry, when you were playing while I was singing, people loved it. Your mistakes were hidden beneath my success. Just keep going—you have a bright future ahead.'"

That encouragement lit a fire in Xavier, pushing him to perfect his craft. Years later, he was chosen to play for the grand exposition of the relics of St. Francis Xavier, a moment he considers one of his greatest hours.

With a career spanning over 200 tiatros and countless other performances, Xavier has transitioned into a mentor, determined to pass on his knowledge to the next generation. He now teaches drums to aspiring musicians, traveling to various places, including Guirim and Siolim, ensuring that the art stays alive. "Many of my students have become teachers themselves, which is the biggest proof that they have grasped the art and are now sharing it with society."

For 32 years, he has also led the Our Lady of Lourdes Choir, further cementing his legacy in Goa's musical world.

Even at 60, Xavier remains as passionate as ever. "As long as the Almighty keeps me safe and healthy, I will continue to play and add 'essence' to the Konkani stage," he declares.

The last Goan fish cutter of Calangute: Francisco 'Abhie' Pereira's life of hard work and humour

For the people of Calangute, Abhie is more than just a fish cutter—he is a friend, a storyteller, a healer, and a reminder of a Goa that once was

MARIA JOSEPHINE PEREIRA

CALANGUTE: In the bustling fish market in Calangute, one figure stands out—not just for his skill but for the warmth and laughter he brings to his work and his customers' day. Francisco Luciana Pereira, better known as Abhie, is the last and only Goan fish cutter in the market. For over 24 years, he has been the go-to man for locals and tourists alike, expertly cleaning and cutting fish with the precision of a craftsman and the heart of a true Goan.

A line forms early each morning at his modest workstation, where he greets customers with a cheerful "Bai" or "Baba," his ever-present smile lighting up the space. "I start my day at 8 am, but even before that, my customers are already waiting. They trust me with their fish, and I take pride in what I do," he says, deftly slicing through a Marlene as he speaks. He gives you tidbits of information as he works – "This is the most expensive fish in the market, locally known as Todaso. Only Goans know about the taste



of this fish, and will fall head over heels to buy it," he laughs.

Born in 1955, Abhie's journey has been anything but easy – fact belied by his ever-smiling face. Growing up in the 1960s, long before Calangute became a tourist hub, he lived in a simple mud house with his seven siblings. "My family lived off the land," he recalls. His father was a toddy tapper and coconut plucker, while his mother, Mariaton,

sold their modest produce in the market. "We were poor, but we never went hungry thanks to kind neighbours and the barter system," he recalls.

Life revolved around nature's bounty. "We fished in lakes, pulled in nets with the fishermen, and raised pigs and chickens," he says. His older brother was a pork butcher, and young Abhie would accompany him, traveling across Bardez to catch pigs. "We'd bring them back on our shoulders, tied up and balancing precariously on our cycles," he laughs, his infectious humour shining through even in the toughest memories.

Calangute of the past was a vastly different world, a sleepy fishing village where the land and sea provided everything. "Back then, there were no hotels, no crowds, just simple homes and hardworking people. We grew our own rice, vegetables, and fruits. Meat was a luxury—we ate what we could catch or hunt," he reminisces.

He vividly recalls fishing in the many lakes and fields, a time

A MASTER OF MANY SKILLS

Apart from being a welder, painter, farmer and a fish cutter, Abhie possesses another rare talent—he is a skilled masseuse known for his delicate, healing touch. "People come to me with sprained necks and twisted ankles," he says, his hands, so adept with a knife, just as skilled in easing pain. Music is another passion. He plays the traditional Goan percussion instrument, the 'Ghumot,' often bringing out his humorous side in song. "Abhie's laughter is as famous as his fish-cutting skills," chuckles a long-time customer.

when children didn't have toys but found joy in nature. "We would wait at the ponds early in the morning when the fish surfaced for oxygen, and with a bow and arrow, we'd catch them. Later, when we grew up, we got an airgun. We'd fill entire sacks with fish, struggling to bring them back on our cycles. Some we'd eat fresh, some we'd pickle, and the rest we'd dry for the monsoon," he says, a twinkle in his eye.

They made the most of every resource available, using fish manure and pig droppings to fertilise their crops. "Everything

was sustainable; we didn't use chemicals. We took only what we needed from the land and the sea." He remembers walking barefoot to the beach, helping the fishermen pull in their nets, in return for a small share of the catch.

His childhood also had moments of adventure. His best friend, Brigido, a footballer and sharpshooter from Siolim, would join him on fishing trips. "We would shoot fish and crabs, explore the fields and forests for wild fruits. Life was simple, but we were never

bored," he recalls.

The turning point for the family came when his sister, Calorina, secured work in Bahrain as a maid. Her earnings changed their fortunes, allowing her to help her siblings find work abroad. In 1971, at just 16, Abhie left for Mumbai, working as a denter and welder. By 1982, he moved to Bah-

rain, continuing in the same profession for 17 years.

Yet, in 2000, he returned to Goa, longing for a simpler life. "I decided to go back to my roots," he says. Setting up his fish-cutting stall in Calangute, he became an indispensable part of the community. "People wait for me. They don't trust anyone else with their fish," he says with pride.

He is happily married to Fatima Pereira, who assists him in the business, alongside another helper. "Without her, I couldn't do this alone," he admits.

In a rapidly changing Goa, where traditional occupations are fading, Abhie remains an odd duck. "I don't want to stop working. I love what I do," he says simply.

