

From kitchen to stage, Paulu Fernandes champions Goemkarponn

A master cook for over 30 years, Paulu did not receive professional training, but learned the art of cooking from his father, who worked as a cook for nearly 80 years

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ALDONA: A traditional Goan cook, Paulu Fernandes, a resident of Santarxette, Aldona, has been preparing authentic dishes for over 30 years, taking small quantity orders from home and ensuring that each meal reflects Goa's rich culinary heritage.

"My day begins with cooking and ends with it," he says. From classic Goan dishes like beef roast, green beef, beef chilly fry, and pork stew to sweet-and-sour delicacies, Fernandes is known for his meticulous preparation and dedication to quality. He leads a small but skilled team that helps him execute orders with precision.

Before starting his cooking, Fernandes carefully curates a shopping list, ensuring that only the freshest ingredients make their way into his kitchen. He then guides his team through the entire cooking process. "Wherever I provide my cooking services, people appreciate my food, and their positive feedback is my great-

I urge the younger generation to learn Goan cuisine and keep this tradition alive. Cooking is an art, and a true cook will never go hungry. Goan cuisine is unique and cherished worldwide, and we must not let it fade away
-Paulu Fernandes

est achievement. Hearing them say the food is good and tasty motivates me to do even better," he shares.

Fernandes did not receive any formal education in catering or undergo professional training. Instead, he inherited his culinary skills from his father, a highly respected cook who served the community for nearly 80 years. As a child, Fernandes would accompany his father to cooking assignments, observing and assisting him. "Everything I am doing today is because of my father's teachings. I believe he is blessing me from above," he says with pride.

Coming from a family of cooks, the Fernandes household is always filled with the aroma of homemade masalas and traditional Goan dishes. Fernandes strongly believes that cooking is a gift from God, one that he has been fortunate to embrace. "Whether I cook in large or small quantities, my quality remains the same. Those who taste my food always remember who cooked it, and that, for me,

is the greatest satisfaction," he explains.

"Earlier, people worked in the fields, cooked, or engaged in manual jobs to earn their livelihood. Government jobs were scarce, and families followed their traditional professions. Today, everyone looks for government jobs or seeks opportunities abroad for quick money. But I believe there is no such thing as easy money. Hard work is the true path to success," he asserts.

He recalls how, in the past, celebrations were held at home with simple yet meaningful gatherings—small sound systems, a bit of dancing, and home-cooked food made the occasion special. "Nowadays, people prefer grand indoor or outdoor halls, hiring DJs and big bands, and spending large amounts of money. While cooking agencies have become more common, I stay true to my own cooking, and I am content with my work," he says.

Despite these shifts, Fernandes has noticed that many people are returning to traditional Goan cuisine after realising the negative health effects of fast food. "Goan dishes like Samarachi Koddli, fish fry, and Shith Koddli are in high demand. Many people, after consuming fast food, realise its impact and come back to their roots. But sadly, the younger generation is showing little interest in learning Goan cooking," he laments.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Beyond cooking, Fernandes has a deep passion for acting and writing short dramas. He has written and performed seven plays during Christmas celebrations at his local church. "My father was involved in Khell Tiatr, and I have inherited his love for drama. I would love to stage more plays, but financial constraints make it difficult," he admits.

His love for storytelling and performance is another way in which he keeps Goan culture alive, blending his culinary artistry with his theatrical talent.

However, he remains hopeful. "Some children are taking an interest in cooking, and many are enrolling in catering courses. But I believe true cooking is learned through experience. Our ancestors never attended culinary schools; they learned by doing. A true Goan cook does not measure ingredients with scales but knows the right amount by instinct. The magic of Goan cuisine lies in our hands and taste buds," he says.

Fernandes ensures that all his dishes are made with traditional methods. He never uses preservatives and prioritises hygiene in his kitchen. His food is in high demand for birthdays, anniversaries, communions, and family functions.

Despite the challenges of his profession, Fernandes finds great joy in his work. "Cooking is hard work. Preparing food sometimes requires staying up all night to ensure everything is ready for the next day. Standing near the fire, handling the heat,

and maintaining safety are all part of the job. But when I see people enjoying my food, all the effort is worth it," he says.

After catering an event, he and his team are often the last ones to leave. "The food counter is the last to close, sometimes as late as 1 AM. We also make sure everything is cleaned up before heading home," he shares.

Many who taste his food return with more orders and recommend him to others. "I have never regretted choosing cooking over an office job. I studied up to Std X and started helping my father during my school days. Today, I am happy and grateful that God has blessed me to continue this work," he says.

With a life dedicated to serving his community through food, Fernandes remains steadfast in his mission. "Cooking is my joy, my passion, and my way of life. As long as I have the strength, I will continue to cook and share my food with the people of my village and beyond."

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.

OF STRUGGLES, STRENGTH AND SERVICE:

How single mum Swati Naik kept her family afloat

ERWIN FONSECA

MAPUSA: Swati Naik from Khorlim, Mapusa, had a normal, happy life like any young woman. She dreamed of marriage and family, and for a while, everything went as planned. However, life had unexpected challenges in store for her. As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, and Swati soon found herself at a critical crossroads—one where stopping was not an option. After her husband's untimely passing, the responsibility of raising her children fell entirely on her shoulders.

"Around 1995, I got married, and soon we had a family of four children, and life was good, with my husband supporting me. But about six years into our marriage, he passed away suddenly. It felt like my world had collapsed. I was in complete shock, unsure of how to provide for my children. I had been mostly doing housework while my husband handled finances, and now everything was left to me. I had no one to confide in, but I told myself I couldn't lose courage—I had to ensure my children got an education," Swati recalls.

Around that time, a well-wisher advised her to take up a job to support her children's future. "With no other option, I took up a daily wage job sweeping and cleaning the Mapusa post office. I needed money to survive and raise my children. This was the only job I could get without influence or bribery, which was common even then. This was about 25 years ago, and things



March 8 marked International Women's Day—a reminder that women have always played a crucial role in society. "Naari Shakti" or women's power is a formidable force, and this story highlights one such woman who has been the backbone of her family despite overwhelming challenges. Raising four children on a meagre income has been an uphill battle, but Swati stands as a courageous woman who has dedicated 25 years of her life to the Indian postal service. Through her hard work, she has helped countless people send parcels to their loved ones, ensuring their connections remain strong despite the distance

were quite different," she adds.

Years passed, and Swati continued her humble service at the post office. Then, some well-wishers suggested she take up the job of stitching and packing parcels, as the elderly man who previously did the work had passed away. "I had no knowledge of this work, but I decided to take the plunge. I learned how to stitch and pack parcels, and soon, I set up a small table outside the Mapusa post office to help people," she says.

Today, Swati and one other man have been stitching and packing parcels in front of the Mapusa post office for the past 15 years. "For 15 years now, through sun and rain, I arrive here at 10 am and leave by 2 pm every day, except postal holidays," she says. It's not a high-paying job—just enough to make ends meet. But Swati's dedication is admirable. She continues working as a postal employee on daily wage while also stitching parcels, sweeping, and cleaning the post office.

Though her children are still unemployed, she remains hopeful and greets everyone with a smile.

The past 30 years have been long and difficult, filled with struggles and hardships. "After I started working as a parcel stitcher, I met many people, especially foreigners, who were grateful for my service. But now, foreign tourists are gone, and only Indian tourists use this service," she explains.

The postal system has also undergone dramatic changes. Many village post offices in Bardez now offer parcel packing services, reducing the number of people coming to Mapusa. Additionally, with online and private parcel services increasing, Swati's

customer base has dwindled. "People sending parcels have reduced. First, because foreigners have decreased. Second, because village post offices now provide the service, so people don't travel to Mapusa. Business has dropped, but I am still managing somehow," she says.

Swati also notes that changes in postal regulations have made her job harder. "Earlier, the materials required for packing were minimal. But now, postal rules mandate that parcels be wrapped in plastic, cloth, and made completely airtight. This means I need more materials, which has cut into my profit margin. It's a double blow—one on one hand, I must follow these guidelines, and on the other, the cost of materials has skyrocketed. If I increase my prices, people won't come to me, so I've kept my rates the same," she explains.

"Some days, I don't earn anything at all. I sit all day without a single customer and return home empty-handed. Other days, there are enough customers to make it through. It's an unpredictable income, but I have managed all these years and raised my children with this work," she says.

Despite the challenges, Swati has remained a pillar of strength. Many tourists and customers have expressed gratitude for her services, especially since she charges reasonably. Her only dream is to see her children secure stable jobs and a good life.



A cut above: Tailor Manjula's story of hard work and hustle

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BENAULIM: Manjula Danadamani, fondly called Manju by the people of Benaulim, is a 33-year-old tailor who has turned her craft into a thriving business while juggling motherhood and household responsibilities. From sewing baby clothes and saree blouses to evening gowns, salwar kameez, and uniforms, she has built a reputation for her skill and dedication.

Coming from a family of tailors in Karnataka, Manju was always drawn to sewing. As a child, she enjoyed watching her sisters at work and soon found herself experimenting with upcycling outfits. "I started small—altering a salwar kameez with a new cut or adding an eye-catching backpiece. That caught people's attention, and soon, they started giving me work," she recalls. Encouraged by the response, she pursued a tailoring course to refine her skills.

Some days, even though it's a passion, it can get tiring. There were days I wasn't able to wke up. But you have to push yourself because success in any field requires discipline
-Manjula Danadamani

After marriage, she moved to Goa in 2007 to join her husband, a baker. They lived in a tiny, rented home, and when their daughter Kushi was born, managing on a single income became difficult. "There was no other way out. We were barely able to make ends meet, with the medical expenses and other necessities for the baby. With my savings and my husband's support, I bought a sewing machine and got back to work. The whirl of the machine felt like music to my ears after so long," she says. She started from home, taking care of her family while slowly building

From a single sewing machine in a rented home to a thriving tailoring business, Manju's fingers stitched away, weaving a story of resilience. Balancing motherhood, household duties, and her craft, she proves that dedication and perseverance never go out of style. Speaking to O Herald, she reflects on the challenges of COVID-19 when work came to a standstill. "With no events or occasions, people had nowhere to go, and orders stopped. But soon, they started sending clothes for repairs. I began sewing masks and scrunchies, and little by little, I got back on my feet."

her clientele.

Work picked up quickly—starting with baby clothes and salwar kameez, followed by repairing old garments. With a keen eye for fashion, she adapted to Goa's culture, learning to stitch Western wear, gowns, and dresses, which made her popular among the women in Benaulim. She welcomed every challenge, saying, "Whenever someone walked in with a difficult pattern, I kept trying until I got it right. I never said no to work because it never felt like work."

When the pandemic hit, both she and her husband were left without an income. "No functions were happening, people had nowhere to go, and work stopped. But soon, people started sending clothes for repairs. I began sewing masks and scrunchies, and slowly, I got back on my feet," she shares.

Today, Manju handles everything from customised ladies wear to school uniforms. Her day starts at 6 AM, preparing breakfast for her children, Kushi and

Lokesh, before dropping them off to school and college. She then opens her shop, working non-stop until lunchtime, after which she rushes home to cook for her family before returning to work. "Some days, even though it's a passion, it can get tiring. But you have to push yourself because success in any field requires discipline," she says.

With every stitch, Manju weaves together hard work, persistence, and love for her craft—proving that no dream is too small if pursued with dedication.

