

# One with the earth: Digamber Nagvekar on the dying art of coconut plucking

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**ALDONA:** Digamber Nagvekar, a resident of Corjuem, has spent most of his life as a coconut plucker. At 50 years old, he continues to climb towering trees, plucking not only coconuts but also mangoes, pruning branches, and ploughing fields to cultivate paddy during the monsoons. For him, this profession is not just a job but a lifelong passion.

"This is not a newly acquired skill. I have been doing this since childhood. When people ask me how long I have been in this profession, I often lose track of time, but when I calculate, I realise that 35 years have gone by so quickly," he says.

Nagvekar comes from a family deeply rooted in traditional occupations. Inspired by his elders, he naturally followed in their footsteps, believing that this would be his means of livelihood and survival. In his early years, he climbed trees using a simple rope tied around his feet, allowing him to ascend with ease. "Back then, we had no fear of climbing trees. Once you get used to something, you get attached to it. Despite difficulties and



## HARVESTING FRUIT WITH TRADITIONAL KNOW-HOW

From the ground, an experienced coconut plucker like Nagvekar can assess whether the coconuts are ready to be harvested. "The process of ripening varies, and not everyone can identify the changes in a coconut. Every three months, we can remove three bunches, but if we try for a fourth, it remains tender. While I often advise tree owners about this, the final decision always rests with them."

The process of plucking is not just about collecting coconuts. It involves cleaning the tree by removing old, dried, and over-matured leaves. "This

cleansing process is essential. We also treat trees affected by disease, ensuring better air circulation," he notes. However, he has observed a worrying trend where people have stopped taking care of their coconut trees.

"Many think that as long as they get coconuts or mangoes, there's no need to care for the trees. Eventually, they cut them down. Earlier, people nourished their trees with salt and organic waste. Now, they don't bother, thinking it's a waste of time and effort," he laments.

Despite the availability of modern tools, the profession remains dangerous. "Many coconut pluckers have lost their lives while doing this job. Every living being needs care, and the same applies to a coconut tree. If its roots catch a disease and become weak, the tree can collapse. The depth of a coconut tree's roots is about a metre, but people often plant them improperly, leading to weak bases and eventual falls," he explains.

Although he has worked in this field for 35 years, Nagvekar's formal education ended at Class 7. "We were helpless back then.

problems, we moved forward and achieved our goals," he recalls.

Today, modern machines have made climbing easier and safer. The government also offers training programmes for those interested in taking up this profession. However, Nagvekar believes that true expertise in coconut plucking comes not only from climbing but from understanding the trees.

"One has to be confident while climbing, maintain a strong body posture, and ensure proper support, whether using a rope or a machine. Newcomers often lack confidence, but with regular

practice, they become more comfortable," he explains.

Nagvekar, along with others in his field, educates people about the importance of coconut trees and proper tree care. "Coconut trees provide numerous products, including brooms, ropes, and leaves used for huts. Unfortunately, the newer generation of coconut pluckers trained by government schemes only learns how to climb using machines. They lack the knowledge to distinguish between mature and immature coconuts or to recognise tree diseases."

We needed money to support the family, so we had no choice but to take up this work," he recalls. His father was also a farmer who owned a few cows.

However, he strongly encourages young children to prioritise education. "We had no option but to leave school, but today's children must study hard. Education is essential. I take great pride in my work and feel happy doing it because it has been a part of me since childhood. But this generation doesn't want to do such work because it lacks glamour and excitement—it only involves hard work," he says.

Nagvekar believes that traditional occupations like coconut plucking require not just labour but also a deep sense of responsibility and dedication. "Due to the lack of Goans taking up traditional jobs, migrants have taken over, offering services at cheaper rates. But they often lack the necessary knowledge and end up damaging crops and production. We have become outsiders in our own state, and soon, we may have to rely on them completely."

Nagvekar is also deeply concerned about the indiscriminate cutting of trees. "People fail to



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understand the significance of a tree. If a tree is affected by disease or has a weak base, their first instinct is to cut it down. It really hurts us when trees are cut so mercilessly. These trees are our lifeline. They bring rain, and rain gives us crops and our livelihood," he stresses. He hopes that the people of Goa will wake up to the importance of preserving their traditions and environment. "Wake up, Goans. Wake up."

## From engineer to agro entrepreneur: Chaitanya Malik's return to his roots



ERWIN FONSECA

**PERNEM:** Young minds are often creative and enterprising, eager to showcase their skills and take on challenges. When the path is already well-established, following it may bring success, but it is those who carve their own way who become true trendsetters and role models. Chaitanya Malik from Hasapur, Pernem, is one such individual—an ambitious young entrepreneur who has created his own identity.

A computer engineer by profession, Chaitanya had no inclination ten years ago that he would open an entirely new chapter in his life. He pursued engineering with the idea of working for a multinational company, but when he saw his ancestral land lying neglected, he decided to change course and build his own future.

"It was around 2016 that I took the first step to revive my ancestral property in Hasapur. Since Hasapur is a newly formed panchayat, we had to rely on Alorna for paperwork, which made the process more difficult. On top of that, arranging the initial investment was a challenge. But I had a clear goal," says Chaitanya.

Despite the hardships, he remained determined, conducting

research on future prospects while setting his plans in motion. "Finally, in 2016, with an initial investment of around Rs 15 lakh, I started this agro-tourism farm and dairy farm. Setting up the dairy and buying cows cost Rs 5 lakh, while the remaining Rs 10 lakh went into reviving the agro farm and building basic infrastructure."

From that moment on, there was no turning back. Chaitanya embarked on a journey to create a thriving empire of dairy farming and agro-tourism in Hasapur. "Initially, we had only a few cows, and our daily milk output was around 15 litres. But I always wanted to expand, and today, we produce about 150 litres a day, with a herd of around 30 cows," he shares.

Though proud of his engineering background, Chaitanya named his farm Dr Malik's Farm in honour of his father, a PhD holder who has been his guiding force and source of inspiration. His mother, an employee at the Zonal Education Office in Mapusa, has also supported his transition into dairy farming and agro-tourism. She believes that not only has Chaitanya revived their ancestral land, but he has also given it a new lease of life.

Now a role model for aspiring young entrepreneurs, Chaitanya has big dreams. At just 30, he is not only focused on supplying quality milk but has also built a reputation for producing high-quality ghee, which is always in demand. While he has already achieved significant success in dairy farming, he has ambitious plans for expansion, with a keen focus on growing his agro-tourism venture.

"This is our ancestral land, revived with the support of my family. We have solar-fenced the farm and planted fruit-bearing trees, vegetables, medicinal plants, and spices. There is still a lot of scope for improvement," he says. The farm, situated near the Tillari canal, is a scenic retreat, enhanced by the cool waters flowing beside it. "Today's youth have lost their connection with nature due to the overuse of modern gadgets. That's why I've created this space as an ideal getaway—where people can enjoy a traditional Goan meal, learn about sustainable farming, and truly experience nature," he explains.

Chaitanya has no regrets about leaving computer engineering for dairy and agro-tourism. "I plan to build an overnight guest house so that visitors can stay and experience the beauty of Pernem at sunrise, with only the sound of birds and flowing water around them. I want to educate people about how they can enjoy and learn from nature without exploiting it. That is my vision for this farm," he shares.



## Saying 'I do' without waste: Inside this Goa couple's eco-friendly wedding

RAAJWRITA DUTTA

For this couple, sustainability is not just a passing trend or a buzzword, it's a lifestyle they have intentionally embraced over the years. Svetlana D'costa, an environmental professional at rePurpose Global, has long embraced a zero-waste lifestyle. "Sustainability has always been a part of me," she explains. "Long before rePurpose Global, I was composting food scraps, using a menstrual cup, and ensuring all my dry waste was recycled," she tells The Better India.

Joel Fernandes, on the other hand, has a background in finance and has worked across IT, supply chain, consulting, and sustainability. He brings a unique perspective to their partnership, both in life and work.

### SMALL CHOICES THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

For the ceremony and reception, they chose a minimalist approach to decor. The couple used jute and wooden elements for seating and decorations, keeping everything simple and sustainable.

"The flowers were repurposed from another event, ensuring nothing went to waste. We asked the event management team to take back the table pieces and decor at the end of the day for reuse. We made sure all our decor was either reusable or biodegradable," adds Svetlana.

In line with their zero-waste ethos, they also ensured that all the food served was sustainably packaged and compostable.

"Initially, we had our hearts set on serving biryani at the wedding, so we approached a local vendor. However, he was reluctant to change his packaging, which was a key concern for us. After some thought, we discovered sugarcane bagasse packaging and considered buying it ourselves, asking the ven-

**The most unique aspect of their wedding was the way they incorporated the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their church ceremony. "We turned our offerings and prayers into prayers for the SDGs. We had offerings like fruits for zero hunger, books for quality education, and solar lamps for renewable energy. We even used repurposed cartons for the offering boxes," explains the bride.**

ensure it embodied the values we both hold dear."

Their decision to marry near the place where they first met, at a work retreat in Varca, Goa, was the perfect starting point. "We chose Cavelossim Beach for the ceremony, just a short distance away from Varca Beach, to revive the memories of our first meeting and to mark the beginning of our lifelong commitment to each other," the couple shares.

From the beginning, they knew they wanted to plan a wedding that protected the planet and avoided unnecessary waste. "Our focus was clear from the start," says Svetlana. "We both work in sustainability, so it was non-negotiable for us to make our wedding environmental-friendly."



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time doing this research, and it helped us make informed decisions. Finally, we tasted the food at a bakery, and it was perfect," she adds.

Instead of offering bottled drinks, they opted to serve fresh sugarcane juice and coconut water to their guests. "We found a local sugarcane juice vendor and asked for special permission from the church to bring him inside the church quadrangle," says Svetlana. "The leftover sugarcane pulp was used to feed cows."

### SORTING AND ELIMINATING WASTE AT THE VENUE



The couple also thought about waste management during the event. The bride recalls, "We had a waste management team on-site to ensure that everything was sorted and managed properly. We set up colour-coded bamboo bins for recycling and composting throughout the venue."

"Once the dustbins were filled, the waste was taken to the back end, where a team of waste workers carefully opened each bag and sorted the waste into nine different categories. We kept paper separate, food scraps in another, and coconuts in yet another. The food scraps and coconuts were sent off for composting. We also made sure to separate organic waste from recyclable materials. All paper and cardboard were sent for recycling. Nothing went to the landfill, everything was reused, repurposed, or recycled," adds Joel, his voice filled with pride. There was also a cigarette recycling station. Divya Ravichandran, the founder and CEO of Skrap, the waste management team at the venue, says, "Our team actively guided guests with signage and informative posters, making waste sorting both simple and engaging. Every item of waste was meticulously catego-

rised and sent to the appropriate recycling centres and composting facilities."

Their waste-conscious mindset even extended to the wedding favours. Instead of the usual trinkets, the couple chose to give guests organic honey from a local Goan apiary, packaged in glass jars, sourced by them.

When it came to transportation, the couple took steps to reduce their carbon footprint by arranging shuttle buses for guests. "We wanted to minimise the number of cars at the wedding to reduce pollution, so we organised three shuttle buses," Svetlana explains. "We also asked guests not to bring physical gifts but instead contribute to a social impact registry, where they could donate to causes such as climate action, disaster relief, and women's empowerment, via our wedding website."

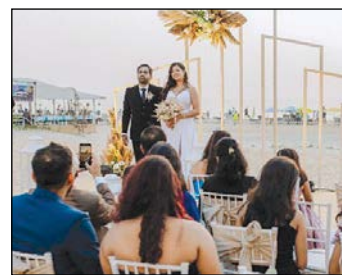


### FINDING ECO-FRIENDLY SOLUTIONS: The challenge of removing plastic

"The challenge with bottled water was the biggest obstacle," she admits. "At most events, the 250 ml bottled water is everywhere, whether you like it or not. But we knew we had to find a better alternative."

They decided to set up water stations with large 20-litre cans of water, accompanied by paper cups, sugarcane bagasse cups, and reusable glasses. "We worked with the venue to set up these water stations and even paid extra to have staff maintain them throughout the day," says the bride.

From the very beginning, they made eco-friendly choices, starting with the decision to eliminate paper invitations and embrace digital invites. "Our wedding website also explained our sustainability efforts and encouraged guests to contribute to the cause. We shared information on how guests could help, what they should bring, and what to expect at a zero-waste wedding," she adds.



### IMPACT ON THE SOCIETY

Their efforts were well-received, with about 200 guests attending the event. At the end of the day, they generated 300 kg of waste, including approximately 66 kg of recyclable waste and the remainder biodegradable, such as food scraps and coconut shells.

To further their commitment to sustainability, the couple also partnered with the local clean-up initiative Saaf Samudra, collecting and recycling 250 kgs of ocean-bound plastic from Goa's coastline on behalf of each attendee.

Edited by Megha Chowdhury;