

# MIGRANT WORKERS FILL THE VOID AS TRADITIONAL TRADES FADE IN GOA

Goa's changing labour landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, migrant workers have kept the wheels of construction, agriculture, and carpentry turning. On the other, the loss of traditional skills among locals points to a cultural and economic transition that could prove difficult to reverse

TEAM HERALD reports

Goa's traditional occupations—once the backbone of rural and urban livelihoods—are steadily fading into obscurity, sidelined by a surge of migrant labour that now dominates the skilled and unskilled work sectors across the State. Trades such as agriculture, carpentry, plumbing, baking, weaving, tailoring, painting, and similar hands-on crafts, once passed down through generations, are seeing fewer and fewer local takers.

A number of factors have contributed to this steady decline. For many Goan families, aspirations have shifted over the years. Parents now prefer to send their children abroad for education in pursuit of better career opportunities and economic prospects. For others, the appeal of white-collar jobs and the societal respect they command often outweighs the perceived value of continuing family trades.

The advancement of mechanisation has also played a role in the diminishing presence of traditional occupations. In sectors like agriculture and masonry, machines have replaced manual tools, reducing the need for human skill and making such work less attractive to the younger generation.

With local youth increasingly reluctant to follow in the footsteps of their elders, the machinery and tools once used by their fathers and grandfathers lie idle—symbolic relics of a lifestyle that is vanishing. This shift has opened the door for migrant workers, who now fill the gap left by locals in both skilled and unskilled sectors across the State.

## Steady employment for migrant workers in Margao

In Margao, migrant workers from various Indian States have found a reliable source of employment in trades such as carpentry, masonry, plumbing, and construction. The town's well-connected infrastructure—including its busy bus stand and railway station—has made it an accessible hub for labourers looking to settle, even temporarily.

Several workers who spoke to O Herald said the town offers both ease of travel and dependable work opportunities. "We come here because it's easier to reach, and once we're here, there's always some work to be found—either through referrals or directly at construction sites," one carpenter from Uttar Pradesh explained.

Much of their employment is driven by word-of-mouth referrals, ongoing construction projects, and a growing demand for home renovations. Workers say they are often hired because they deliver quality work quickly and at competitive rates. "If there was no demand, we wouldn't be here," a ma-

son pointed out. "But we get called because people know the work will get done fast and properly."

Contractors in the area acknowledge the growing reliance on migrant labour. With increasing construction and renovation activities, the availability of experienced hands helps complete projects faster and at lower costs. This mutually beneficial dynamic has led to a constant influx of workers, which shows no signs of slowing down as long as the demand remains.

## In Mapusa, migrant labourers command the market

In Mapusa, the daily hustle begins at dawn as hundreds of migrant labourers gather at the town's key junctions, including the inter-State bus stand and the Mapusa bypass. Armed with their tools, lunchboxes, and water bottles, they line up in hope of securing work for the day.

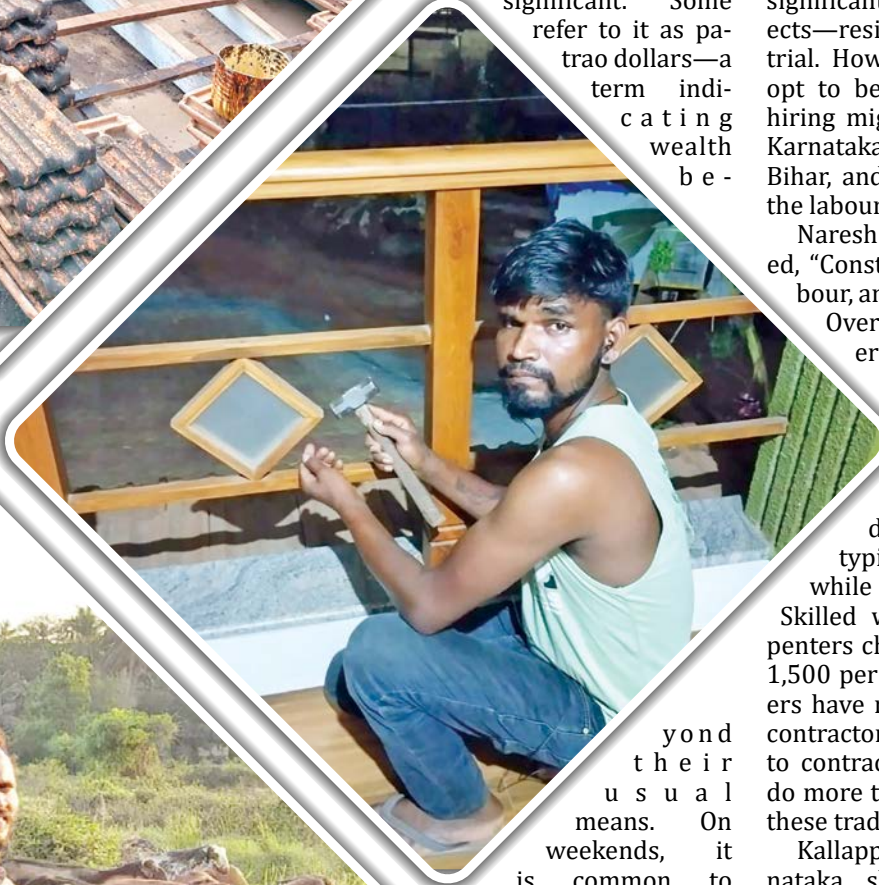
The labourers' rates vary based on gender, skill level, and type of work. Women labourers, who engage in everything from cleaning to construction assistance, typically charge Rs 700 per day. Male helpers demand around Rs 900 per day. Notably, many labourers refuse to negotiate their rates, preferring to return home rather than accept lower wages.

Skilled tradesmen such as masons, plumbers, carpenters, and tile fitters command anywhere between Rs 1,200 and Rs 1,500 per day. As the day progresses, contractors and homeowners arrive to pick up workers, often selecting based on skill and experience.

Labourers typically begin work by 8:30 am, take a one-hour lunch break at 1:00 pm, and wrap up by 5:30 pm—even if hired again for the next day. In addition to their daily wages, employers are expected to cover their transportation costs.

A majority of these workers hail from States such as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. Those from West Bengal, Kerala, and Karnataka are often preferred for farm labour. Workers from Uttar Pradesh are highly sought after for carpentry, having effectively taken over from the Chari community, which once dominated this trade in Goa.

A noticeable pattern emerges at the



For many of these migrants, who come from agrarian backgrounds and marginal incomes, the money they earn in Goa is significant. Some refer to it as *para-dollars*—a term indicating wealth beyond their usual means. On weekends, it is common to see these labourers crowding remittance outlets to transfer money back home to support their families.

However, the picture is not without hardship. Many of these workers live in precarious, overcrowded conditions. In places like Saligao, Guirim, Bastora, Uccasaim, Cunchelim, and parts of Mapusa, landlords rent out tin sheds or cramped cubicles at Rs 1,000 per head per month. Rooms often house six to eight workers, with little privacy or proper sanitation.

## Migrant labour powers Ponda's construction sector

In Ponda, the daily scene at the KTC bus stand offers a glimpse into the growing dependency on migrant labour. As early as 6 am, around 400 workers gather each day—excluding Sundays and public holidays—hoping to secure daily-wage work from local residents, contractors, and businesses.

This informal marketplace reflects a broader trend. With the passing of the older generation and a noticeable lack of interest from Goan youth, traditional jobs

like laterite stone dressing, house repair, coconut plucking, and agricultural work are now almost entirely carried out by migrant workers.

Over the past decade, Goa has seen a significant surge in construction projects—residential, commercial, and industrial. However, while locals increasingly opt to become contractors, they prefer hiring migrant workers from States like Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh to carry out the labour-intensive work.

Nareish Naik, a resident of Ponda, noted, "Construction work involves hard labour, and many Goans shy away from it. Over the last decade, migrant workers have grabbed the opportunity and now earn daily wages that are sometimes higher than what Goans working in factories or offices receive."

According to him, a male daily-wage labourer in Ponda typically earns Rs 800 to Rs 900, while women earn around Rs 700. Skilled workers like masons and carpenters charge between Rs 1,200 and Rs 1,500 per day. Some experienced labourers have now graduated to become sub-contractors, providing teams of workers to contractors. "The government should do more to train and incentivise locals in these trades," Naik added.

Kallappa Badigar, a labourer from Karnataka, shared his experience: "There is demand for all types of labour. We are hired by locals and contractors alike. During the monsoon, when work slows down, many of us return to our native villages where we cultivate crops. Once the rains end, we come back to Goa."

## A new labour landscape

Goa's changing labour landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, migrant workers have kept the wheels of construction, agriculture, and home improvement turning. On the other, the loss of traditional skills among locals points to a cultural and economic transition that could prove difficult to reverse.

As older tools gather dust and new ones find their way into the hands of outsiders, the conversation around training, retention, and dignity of labour for Goans becomes more urgent. Without intervention—either through policy or education—the traditional trades of Goa may soon exist only in memory, replaced by an itinerant workforce building a new chapter for the State.

(With inputs from Vithaldas Hegde, Peter de Sousa, Karsten Miranda and Santosh Naik)

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

—Digamber Nagvekar, coconut farmer and plucker

The fact is that Goan businesses will not be able to survive without migrant workers and migrant customers as well! In the restaurant business, we always want to hire more Goans because they are fluent in English, are clean and relatively trustworthy, and we do not need to worry about finding them accommodation. But it is not practical as most Goans in the hospitality field prefer to do grunt work on cruise ships or migrate to the UK—we are unable to match these salaries. So, we employ workers from places like Jharkhand, Nepal and West Bengal. If one of our utility staff does not turn up at work, all we need to do is drive to the MMC building in Margao, and choose from the big group of daily wage labourers waiting outside. Their situation is so desperate that as soon as you slow down, half a dozen of them literally leap into the car—without even asking what job we need them for. Many of them are alcoholics, and dirty and dishevelled from sleeping on the street

—Restaurant owner, Colva

There was a time we would bake 4,000 to 5,000 pieces of bread a day. After Covid-19, things slowed down. Many migrants started bakeries, and some Goans even rented theirs out. That's when the quality of our local wood-fired bread dropped. Traditional Goan businesses are slowly slipping away. People are handing them over to migrants who care more about profit than quality. The heart of Goan bread is being lost

—Santiago Miranda, baker, Aldona

No Goan youngster from this generation wants to learn this trade or join us. I'd be happy to teach, but all the people that have approached me were outsiders, as most Goans interested in this field have moved abroad for better opportunities. This isn't a white-collar job, but it's sustainable in a place like Goa

—Carlos Cabral, motorcycle mechanic, Panjim

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