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Meet the social worker touching lives, restoring hope in Ponda

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PONDA: In a world that often celebrates wealth and fame, Adarsh Ashok Toraskar from Prabhnagar, Ponda, walks a different path—one paved with selfless service and compassion. Raised in a modest, middle-class home, Adarsh was blessed with strong values, a kind heart, and a good education, all thanks to the nurturing of his parents. These early foundations shaped his belief that true success lies in giving, not gathering.

After landing a well-paying job, Adarsh often reflected: "Do I truly deserve this much?" That quiet question sparked a life-changing decision—he began setting aside part of his salary and time to serve those in need. What started as a simple act of kindness soon blossomed into a lifelong mission.

During the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, while fear kept many indoors, Adarsh stepped out—with gloves, masks, sanitisers, and groceries for the needy. With the help of a close friend, he started small but made a big difference. He even used his personal car to transport Covid patients to



hospitals, putting their lives ahead of his own safety.

One unforgettable day at the Sub-District Hospital in Ponda, he saw families struggling to carry heavy oxygen cylinders up to the hospital lift. The sight moved him deeply. Determined to help, he waited outside for hours to meet Dr. Kuvellar and share his idea of building oxygen cylinder trolleys. Though the initial meeting was challenging, Adarsh persisted. Using his own money, he built a trolley that could carry seven cylinders, easing a painful burden for many families.

The story caught the attention of the media—and eventually, the Chief Minister of Goa, Pramod Sawant. The Chief Minister personally called

Adarsh, appreciated his noble effort, and invited him for a meeting. "That day, Dr. Sawant praised my work and encouraged me to continue serving society. He also requested ten more oxygen cylinder trolleys," he recalls. Adarsh worked day and night, delivering all ten trolleys across Goa within 48 hours. It was a turning point in his life. The Chief Minister's words lit a spark in Adarsh's heart—and he never looked back.

In 2022, he gave formal shape to his

THE ADARSH SEVA FOUNDATION'S WORK SPANS MULTIPLE AREAS

Skilling for women: Over 30 cake-making workshops, along with ari embroidery and razi-making sessions held in Ponda, Margao, Canacona, Pernem, Panjim, and Mapusa.

Youth support: Over 150 private-sector job placements facilitated; active sponsorship of sports tournaments and youth events.

Support for the elderly and differently-abled: Health camps offering eye check-ups, physiotherapy, homeopathy, dental care; distribution of spectacles and PPE kits to sanitation workers.



Free ambulance service: Launched to support patients in need.

in Ponda (two installed so far) to enhance public security.

Education aid: Provision of books and essential learning materials for underprivileged students.

Environmental care: Regular tree plantation drives.

Community safety: Installation of CCTV cameras

Lifesaving support: Consistent organisation of blood donation camps.

Village development: Renovation of cremation grounds, repairs of village roads and temples, regular cleanliness drives, and public awareness campaigns.

mission by founding the Adarsh Seva Foundation, through which he has touched countless lives. (see box)

Looking ahead, Adarsh is working on launching a hearse van, cleaning local creeks in Ponda, and introducing better water conservation practices. He has already taken steps to revive contaminated springs and lakes in the region, aiming to ensure clean water for future generations.

His message to today's youth is heartfelt:

"When you help others, your own stress disappears. You feel peace—and blessings naturally follow."

Adarsh Toraskar's story is a reminder that greatness doesn't come from titles or applause, but from quiet, tireless service to others. Inspired by a moment, fuelled by purpose, and led by heart—his journey is not only admirable, it's a path worth following.

A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF GOA

In our continuous efforts to put people at the centre 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. Please email editor@herald-go.com or reach us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Mapusa's oldest miller holds on to family legacy, faith and flour

ERWIN FONSECA

MAPUSA: Mapusa currently has just one flour and masala mill, run by 75-year-old Ramesh Bicholkar, the fifth-generation owner of the family business. "From what I've been told, about 120 years ago—when the Portuguese were still ruling Goa—my ancestors came to Mapusa for the feast of Our Lady of Miracles," says Ramesh. "They were extremely poor, almost living hand to mouth. They brought with them a few bottles of 'goli'soda—the kind with the glass 'ball' stopper—which was a craze back then. The plan was to sell soda at the feast fair for a few days and return. But that never happened."

Instead, they found respect, affection, and what Ramesh believes were the blessings of Milagr Saibinn. "That changed everything. They decided to stay and settle in Bardez."

Though soda was their initial business, the idea for a mill emerged later. "At first, they believed the soda venture would flourish with divine intervention. But they soon realised the town lacked a flour and masala grinding facility. That's how our mill started, in the old market near Alankar Theatre," Ramesh recalls. The Mapusa market we know today was meticulously planned by the Portuguese and inaugurated just before Goa's liberation in 1960. Before that, the old market—just a stone's throw from Mapusa Church—was where people gathered. "It worked out well," says Ramesh. "My ancestors could sell soda and run the mill during the feast. We had many customers—people came to us to grind wheat flour and masala."

As the new municipal market was established, activity shifted there and the old market lost its crowd. After operating the mill in the old market for nearly a century, the Bicholkars moved it to the present location in the main market. "When the mill started, there was barely any electricity in Goa. It was mechanical and labour-intensive. It became fully electric only in the late 1940s or early 1950s," says Ramesh.

The current location is about 35 years old, but the business itself has been around for five generations. "The sixth generation will be my son Chinmaya," he adds. "Except paddy, we grind everything—wheat, chillies, turmeric, coriander... And our loyal customers, especially older people, still believe in grinding their own flour and masala

“The mill at its current location is about 35 years old, but the business itself has been around for five generations. I've worked here since I was 10 years old, and my son Chinmaya is the sixth generation. Except paddy, we grind everything—wheat, chillies, turmeric, coriander... And our loyal customers, especially older people, still believe in grinding their own flour and masala

—Ramesh Bicholkar



Mapusa will celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Miracles—Milagr Saibinn as she's fondly known—on Monday, May 5. She is among the most revered figures for people across Goa, regardless of caste, creed, or religion. Many attribute their life's successes to her blessings and return year after year to express gratitude, seek favours, or simply pay homage to the Saibinn who they hold dear. It was in this spirit that the now well-known Bicholkar family, originally from St Cruz, came to Mapusa decades ago. Today, they've risen to respectable positions in society—but their journey began, humbly, at the feet of Milagr Saibinn

coriander... And our loyal customers, especially older people, still believe in grinding their own flour and masala."

Across Bardez, a few other mills still grind paddy, coconut, and grains, but in Mapusa, the Bicholkar mill has stood the test of time. Ramesh admits the business is increasingly difficult to sustain. "Earlier, labour was cheap and our charges were just a few paise. Today, a worker expects Rs 800 to 1,000 a day. Our monthly electricity bill is around Rs 50,000. Taxes and tariffs have also gone up. This business is no longer viable," he says.

Still, the family has survived—and even thrived—thanks to the mill. "Since I was 10, I've worked here. With the blessings of Milagr Saibinn and the goodwill of our customers, we charge just Rs 10 per kg for grinding. And we get steady business throughout the year. This mill even funded my holy pilgrimage to Shirdi—40 years in a row," he says.

Ramesh now lives in Verla Canca but makes it a point to open the mill every morning at 8 am. He employs five workers who keep the mill running.

Yet he is not optimistic about the future. "Technology is advancing. People will start using home-based or portable mills. When that happens, these traditional mills may lose relevance," he says.

Grateful to both Milagr Saibinn and Lairai Devi, Ramesh believes that divine blessings and community support have helped the Bicholkar family rise and contribute meaningfully to Bardez. Former Mapusa Chairperson Dr Nutan Bicholkar was also part of the extended family. "She tried to improve the market infrastructure many times," he adds.

To the younger generation considering leaving behind family businesses or moving abroad, Ramesh offers a word of advice: "Think twice. Anyone who works sincerely can earn respect right here in Goa."

"Our family tradition will be preserved at all costs. We have the blessings of Milagr Saibinn. In spite of adversity, this mill will continue to run and flourish," Ramesh concludes.

Sarita Polle turned barren land into a thriving mogra plantation

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ALDONA: Sarita's journey began on once-barren fields that had long seen no cultivation. Faced with limited opportunities and unwilling to seek employment elsewhere, she resolved to make something of her own land. The group first planted Roza (marigold) flowers, and the initial yield was excellent, giving them hope and motivation. However, the following year, pre-monsoon showers completely flattened the crop, resulting in a total loss. The group then switched to cultivating ladyfingers (okra), but the returns were far from encouraging.

Their fortunes began to change when they heard of a successful Mogra plantation in Valpoi. Officials from the Agriculture Department in Mapusa organised a visit for their group to learn more about it. While some were hesitant, Sarita was determined to try something new to become self-reliant and support her family.

Stepping into the blooming Mogra field

in Valpoi proved to be a turning point. Sarita was overwhelmed by the beauty and fragrance of the flowers. "It was so mesmerising that I forgot my hunger and thirst," she recalled. The caretaker at the plantation explained that although Mogra farming required consistent effort and care, it offered steady returns. As someone no stranger to hard work, Sarita took it as a challenge.

Upon returning home, she explained the idea to her husband, and they decided to order 200 saplings. Sarita prepared the land herself, digging and readying the soil for planting. She used only organic manure, such as cow dung, avoiding chemical fertilisers that could harm the soil and plants.

For the first two years, there was no visible result. Still, Sarita persevered, tending to the plants with care and dedication. Eventually, her patience paid off. The first few flowers appeared, and the following year she was able to make around 20 garlands. Seeing the garlands



Sarita Polle, a resident of Podwal in Corjuem, is a farmer by profession, working in the fields for many years.

In recent times, she has taken up the cultivation of Mogra (jasmine) flowers—a decision that has transformed both her land and her life.

Sarita is part of a group of women farmers who collectively manage the plantation process, from planting to harvesting

made from her own Mogra brought tears of joy. She had always believed in the potential she had witnessed in Valpoi and never gave up hope.

"I believe any plant, like a newborn child, needs love, patience, and care to grow," she said. "It's not enough to simply plant and water—it requires time and attention."

The third year brought a yield enough for 25 to 30 garlands. By the fourth year, the number grew to 50–60. After five years, her plants were flourishing, producing enough for 400 to 600 garlands. With this expansion, she needed help and invited her group members to join her. The women would arrive by 7 am, complete the harvest by 8.30 am, and then begin making garlands. By 11 am, they would supply the garlands to markets in Bicholim, Mapusa, Asonora, and surrounding areas at prevailing rates.

Now, 15 years later, Sarita has become synonymous with Mogra farming in her area. She has always harboured a deep passion for agriculture, though her journey has not been without its struggles. In the early years, she had no water connection and had to rely on water tankers every eight days. She used the water

sparingly, watering plants by hand instead of using a hose to avoid waste. This practice continued for 13 years, until she finally received a water supply connection, greatly easing her workload.

Mogra cultivation is a year-round activity. During the monsoon season, flowering is limited, but Sarita still manages to make 30–40 garlands. The peak season is from March to

May. She considers her success a blessing from Shree Devi Lairai, whose temple is near her home. Sarita also receives direct orders during Ganesh Chaturthi and other festivals, with many customers visiting her farm personally. She earns at least Rs 500 a

year. She considers her success a blessing from Shree Devi Lairai, whose temple is near her home. Sarita also receives direct orders during Ganesh Chaturthi and other festivals, with many customers visiting her farm personally. She earns at least Rs 500 a

year even during the lean period and significantly more during peak season. The women who assist her are highly experienced and efficient, having worked with her for years. Sarita is proud of her self-reliance. "This is my own work—I don't depend on a boss or a fixed salary," she said. "I'm proud to be a woman who has taken up this task and even created employment for other women."

The sweet scent of Mogra fills her home daily, bringing joy and a sense of fulfilment. Despite her achievements, she has remained grounded. While she does not rely heavily on government support—citing unfulfilled promises—she continues to work with a sense of purpose. Due to health issues, she has recently scaled back her operations and reduced the number of women working with her. Though her children have witnessed her dedication, she is unsure whether they will continue her legacy, as they may prefer office jobs over farming. Her family and neighbours are supportive. Her children occasionally help with the flower picking, and every evening she personally waters the plants. The plantation requires constant care, especially in keeping the roots clean and free of weeds.

Through her Mogra plantation, Sarita Polle has not only earned a livelihood but also discovered a deeper sense of satisfaction. She considers this journey a divine blessing and prays for good health to continue her work and help others. "I truly believe she [Shree Devi Lairai] is watching over me and guiding my journey," she said.