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LOSING THE PLOT? TIATR, GOA'S BELOVED STAGE ART FACES A CULTURAL RECKONING

The tiatr community—home to thousands of artistes, from veteran directors to backstage technicians, singers, and comedians—now finds itself on the brink. What was once a thriving artistic ecosystem is today mired in uncertainty: its future clouded, its traditions under threat, and its practitioners facing growing economic hardship. **MARCOS GONSALVES** brings you the inside story

On any given evening not long ago, the stage lights at Kala Academy in Panjim or Ravindra Bhavan in Margao would glow to life, inviting audiences into a world of laughter, music, and poignant social reflection.

Tiatr—Goa's beloved Konkani theatre form—would unfold in all its vibrant tradition, marked by compelling drama, melodic interludes, and incisive storytelling. But today, those same stages stand in silence. The curtains are drawn not for a change of scene, but for repairs—and an indefinite intermission.

Worse still, alternative venues across Goa have proven ill-equipped to host tiatr, lacking in acoustics, stage depth, or audience capacity. The result? A cultural art form rooted in 133 years of history is now gasping for breath.

The tiatr community, which supports thousands of artists—from veteran directors to backstage technicians, singers, and comedians—now finds itself on the brink. What once was a thriving artistic ecosystem is today mired in uncertainty—its future clouded, its traditions at risk, and its practitioners facing economic hardship.

This unfolding crisis is not a singular challenge but a tangled web—from venue closures and rising production costs to the erosion of traditional formats and the loss of legendary tiatrists. Together, they threaten not just the survival of tiatr as an art form, but its role as a cornerstone of Goan identity.

As tiatr—the soul of Goa's cultural heritage—grapples with mounting challenges, prominent tiatrists and cultural advocates are calling on the government to urgently develop a clear and actionable roadmap to protect and revive this century-old art form.

The Goan tiatr sector, though not officially recognised, is a crucial cultural platform that provides employment to thousands. This year's monsoon tiatr season faces a significant setback due to the non-availability of auditoriums in Panjim and Margao—Goa's key cultural centres. Many directors, producers, and artistes who rely on this season for their livelihood now face financial distress.

Highlighting the impact, Daniel F. de Souza, Konkani author, tiatr critic, and television anchor, stated:

"This is total injustice to our commercial artistes who have sustained the 133-year-old Goan culture by personal sacrifices."

Post-pandemic, a surge in young talent has brought fresh energy to the tiatr scene, making the lack of institutional support even more disheartening. The use of Pai Tiatr Hall for IFFI screenings instead of tiatrs has also drawn sharp criticism.

De Souza urges the tiatr fraternity to unite and demand a dedicated auditorium in Panjim to safeguard their artistic and economic future.

The shutting of the stage: A venue crisis. The recent closure of Ravindra Bhavan in Margao and plans to shut down Kala Academy in Panaji—two of Goa's most prominent cultural hubs—might, to an outsider, appear as just another round of government renovations. But for the tiatr fraternity, these halls are far more than bricks and mortar. They are the very stages upon which the soul of Goan theatre unfolds.

"These are not just performance spaces," says senior tiatr C.D. Silva, a respected voice in the community. "They are the only suitable halls where a full-fledged tiatr, in its complete format, can be done justice. Their closure has thrown our calendar into chaos."

For the uninitiated, tiatr is a demanding format—a theatrical genre that intersperses dialogue with live music, comedy, and topical songs (kantaram). It demands precise acoustics, adequate backstage



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— Franco Viegas, tiatr patron

space for elaborate scene changes, and advanced lighting systems to support its signature dramatics. Few venues across Goa meet these technical requirements.

The closure, then, is not a minor hiccup. It's a crisis of infrastructure. While the government moves ahead with refurbishments, there's no interim solution in place. Other halls, whether due to poor facilities or unavailability, have proven inadequate, said Arnald Costa, President of Non-Stop Tiatr and Tiatranchi Sonvstha.

And the timing could not have been more punishing.

This year, no fewer than 17 new directors were poised to launch their monsoon tiatr productions—a season traditionally marked by high audience turnout and new creative ventures. With no stage to perform on, many of these directors have had to cancel or postpone their shows indefinitely, Costa stated.

The ripple effects are immediate and devastating. For performers and backstage crew—many of whom rely entirely on tiatr for income—the closure translates into lost earnings, stalled careers, and artistic paralysis. And for audiences, it means an absence of the laughter, satire, and cultural reflection that tiatr brings to village halls and city stages alike.

"We're not just losing shows," Costa and Silva add. "We're losing momentum. In an art form like tiatr, momentum is everything."

Without immediate intervention—whether in the form of temporary venue alternatives, portable stage infrastructure, or government-backed performance

identity of tiatr but also undermines its standing as a serious form of theatre.

There is also an economic reality at play. Format-true tiatrs take time, talent, and financial backing. In contrast, short, cheaply produced shows can be staged more frequently and sold more easily. In a competitive, financially strained environment, volume often wins over value.

Still, all is not lost. Institutions like TAG continue to champion the authentic format through workshops, competitions, and mentorship programmes, actively engaging schools and colleges in the process. However, the battle is ongoing—and the future of tiatr's soul will likely depend on how firmly the next generation is anchored to its original rhythm.

Rising costs, shrinking audiences. Producing a traditional tiatr is both an artistic and financial challenge. With large casts, original music, and elaborate stage settings, the costs have soared in re-

storing moral depth and narrative quality is critical to tiatr's survival. Without a course correction, the art form may soon lose both its following and its essence.

Fractured fraternity

In tiatr's earlier decades, there was a strong sense of unity and mutual respect among troupes and artistes. Collaboration was common; camaraderie often trumped competition. Troupes would even postpone their local shows to support visiting groups from Mumbai—a gesture that reflected collective commitment to the art form.

Today, that spirit has largely faded. "There's no unity among us," says veteran tiatr C.D. Silva. "Everyone is out for themselves. Back then, we used to uplift each other. Now, it's survival of the fittest."

This fragmentation has weakened the community's ability to organise, speak with one voice, or advocate effectively. At a time when venue closures and declining standards require a unified response, the lack of solidarity is particularly damaging.

Without collective action, the challenges facing tiatr may only deepen—on and off the stage.

The role of institutions: A work in progress

The Tiatr Academy of Goa (TAG) plays a vital role in preserving and promoting tiatr. Through competitions for students, workshops, and grants, TAG aims to nurture new talent and uphold artistic standards.

"We're committed to maintaining tiatr's originality and encouraging young artists," says Anthony Barbosa, TAG's President. "However, we need stronger support from the private sector and audiences alike."

Preserving tiatr requires collaboration among institutions, artists, and the community. Only through coordinated efforts can this historic art form continue to flourish, bridging the gap between tradition and the challenges of modern times.

What lies ahead: A call for revival. Tiatr stands at a crossroads, and its future depends on urgent, united action from the community, institutions, and government.

Dedicated auditoriums designed specifically for tiatr performances are essential. Current venues either remain closed or lack the technical infrastructure needed for full-scale productions. Proper spaces would allow artists to rehearse and perform without compromise.

Financially, government subsidies must support directors who stay true to the traditional tiatr format—especially for village performances, where costs are high and audiences limited. This would help sustain high-quality productions beyond urban centres. To preserve artistic integrity, a certification body could be established to authenticate tiatr productions. This would help audiences distinguish genuine performances from substandard imitations that harm the reputation of the art form.

The welfare of tiatr artists, many of whom depend solely on their craft for livelihood, also demands attention. Health insurance, emergency relief funds, and pensions are urgently needed to provide security in difficult times.

Finally, the future of tiatr hinges on engaging youth through structured training and mentorship programmes that connect aspiring performers with seasoned tiatrists—ensuring the art form's rich legacy continues to inspire future generations.

Holding the line for Goa's cultural soul. Tiatr is more than entertainment—it is the voice of Goa's people, a mirror of society, and a vibrant celebration of the Konkani language and identity. Its decline would be a profound cultural loss, affecting not only artists but every Goan who cherishes this unique heritage.

The challenges are daunting, but hope



subsidies—the very ecosystem that sustains tiatr may begin to unravel.

Compounding the venue crisis is the emotional and creative loss of some of tiatr's most respected veterans.

"We've lost giants in recent years," says tiatr lover Franco Viegas. "They didn't just act; they nurtured talent, preserved traditions, and guided younger generations. Without them, the community feels directionless."

While fresh talent is emerging, young artistes often lack the support structure that earlier generations enjoyed.

"They need mentors, producers, and above all, audiences willing to embrace new names," Viegas adds.

Commercial vs. competition: A battle for tiatr's soul

At its core, tiatr is not merely a stage play—it is a symphony of storytelling, blending sharp dialogue with musical interludes known as kantaram. These songs, performed live, serve as poignant reflections on the main narrative or as biting commentaries on contemporary issues—politics, corruption, morality, and social reform.

In the commercial circuit, especially those geared toward fast profits and wide appeal, there has been a noticeable departure from this traditional format. Increasingly, what is billed as tiatr turns out to be little more than a patchwork of unrelated scenes, strung together by jokes or slapstick humour—often veering into the territory of the "non-stop show," a term some use pejoratively to describe these disjointed, hybrid performances.

"Only the tiatrs staged for competitions at Kala Academy or under the Tiatr Academy of Goa (TAG) umbrella maintain the original format," says Anthony Barbosa, President of TAG.

"The commercial scene is becoming unrecognisable. It's no longer clear what we're calling 'tiatr' anymore."

This shift is more than just stylistic—it represents cultural distortion. Audiences unfamiliar with traditional tiatr may leave with a skewed understanding of the art form. Worse, younger tiatrists may mimic these diluted formats, thinking them authentic.

Veteran tiatrists and cultural purists argue that this drift not only threatens the

cent years. For directors like Matias Mascrenhas, who strive to preserve the art form's integrity, staging a full-scale tiatr is becoming nearly impossible without support.

"We can't perform in villages anymore," Mascrenhas says. "The costs are too high, and there's no institutional support."

While competition-level tiatrs retain high quality, they are often staged only once or twice due to budget constraints. In contrast, commercial tiatrs—produced on shoestring budgets—dominate the circuit.

This economic imbalance contributes to a growing crisis: declining audiences. Even acclaimed directors now struggle to fill seats. Younger audiences, unfamiliar with the art form's cultural weight, show little interest, while older fans are disheartened by the fall in standards.

"It's demoralising," Mascrenhas admits. "We give our best, but the response is cold."

Many believe that government grants, subsidised tours, or corporate sponsorships are essential to ensuring quality tiatr productions are not lost to economic pressures. Without urgent intervention, tiatr risks losing both its performers and its public.

Vulgarity and decline in standards. A growing concern among the tiatr community is the rise of vulgarity and crass humour in modern productions. What was once a medium known for sharp satire, moral insight, and social critique is increasingly being reduced to double entendres and cheap laughs.

Veteran tiatrists and cultural observers say this shift undermines the integrity of the art form.

"It damages the image of this beautiful art form," says Anthony Barbosa. "Tiatr has always been about thoughtful satire and cultural introspection. It's painful to see it reduced to sensationalism."

This trend has alienated traditional audiences who once looked to tiatr as both entertainment and conscience-keeper. While some troupes aim to appeal to younger crowds, the result has often been counterproductive: loyal audiences are turning away, and new ones remain unconvincing.

Many in the fraternity believe that re-

