

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOAN?

Issues of celebration and connection, reflected in food and song

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Food is one of the many things that make life not only pleasurable but memorable. I recently met a young Goan man who is completing a degree who asked me if I could come to his birthday party and share some sorpotel and vindaloo recipes as the celebration wouldn't be a celebration with them, especially with him being so far away from home. This led me to reflect on the importance of food and consider writing something for Goanet Reader.

As you all know Goans have been a highly mobile population and are scattered all over the globe as a result of colonisation, and in a bid for a better and education for their children. At the beginning of the millennium I undertook a research project to explore how Goan women in Auckland New Zealand coped with the dual transitions of migration and motherhood as becoming a parent in a new county is a common aspect of migration which is also under-researched.

It is well known that migrants draw on cultural resources and links such as the notion of homeland, language, religion, everyday social rituals such as food, drink, dance and song, family, morals, community, landscape, histories and occupations.

Researchers of migrant communities have found that connection with one's ethnic community is vital for collective cultural maintenance. This takes the forms of being involved in community-type social networks in order to maintain their culture, taking part in ethnic institutions, making trips "home" and marrying within the community. These were all identified in my research as significant, but for this piece I have chosen to focus on the importance of traditional food in maintaining Goan culture and in relation to the perinatal period. I have also incorporated words from the Goan women that participated in the research (with deep and heartfelt thanks).

Food has a symbolic and social significance that is deeply embedded in a culture and is used to express many things such as love, friendship, solidarity and the maintenance of social ties. The significance of food is heightened with migration, where it is the most resistant aspect to the acculturation process for migrant communities. Frequently, food is integrated into the host culture, as those Goans living in the United Kingdom or from Africa will attest to as seen by the incorporation of Indian foods into African and British communities.

Traditional food and celebration are pivotal to the construction of Goan identity and an important part of 'everyday' food, religious festivals, weddings and special events. Food also has historical significance as seen by the impact of Portuguese, Muslim and Indian cultures apparent in Goan cuisine. Conversion to Catholicism by the Portuguese meant that foods moved from being taboo to consumable and differentiated Goans from other Indians, making them more Western.

The special foods that go with events during the year are very traditionally Goan, for example we have Christmas sweets. Besides Christmas sweets, I associate eating Pilao on a Sunday and not just any other thing, very Goan. And having your fish curry and rice as well (Lorna).

Fish curries and coconut curries and I had learn to cook when I was quite young and I had wanted to get into the kitchen and dad would go to the marketplace and buy all this yummy fish and come home and cook it up and basically you'd eat Goan and things like that (Rowena).

Goan fish curry is ubiquitous in most households in Goa, eaten regularly and served with rice. Pilao is possibly from Muslim times prior to Portuguese rule, made with basmati rice and flavoured with whole spices like cardamom and stock. The Goan sweets that are mentioned by Lorna originate from Portugal and the Konkan region and they are produced and exchanged with friends and neighbours at Christmas time. Every sweet has coconut in it in milk form or thinly sliced. In Rowena's quote below, food is a way of acknowledging the family and social ties:

We often had picnics, which had all the favourite dishes like sorpotel, xacuti, food were very important in terms of being social and the family (Rowena).

Xacuti is a complicated and painstaking Goan dish made with chicken or lamb that involves the roasting of all the seasonings before they are ground to a paste. Sorpotel is a ceremonial dish made from pork that is prepared for feast days, Christmas, weddings and other special occasions. The following poem by Philip Furtado (1988) does more to illustrate the place of sorpotel in the connections of Goans to 'home'.

Sorpotel

For the hotch potch known as Haggis, let the Scotsman yearn or yell
For the taste of Yorkshire pudding, let the English family dwell.
For the famed Tandoori Chicken, that Punjabis praise like hell
But for us who hail from Goa, there's nothing like SORPOTEL!

From the big wigs in Colaba, to the small fry in Cavel
From the growing tribes in Bandra, to the remnants in Parel.
From the lovely girls in Glaxo, to the boys in Burma Shell
There's no Goan whose mouth won't water, when you talk of SORPOTEL!

And Oh! for Christmas dinner don't you think it would be swell
If by some freak of fortune or by some magic spell
We could, as they have in Goa a bottle of the cajel
And toddy leavened sannas to go with
SORPOTEL!

In this poem, sorpotel becomes a metaphor for migration and connection to home. The names of the Mumbai (Bombay) suburbs, with their differing social capital, in the second verse illustrates that no matter where in the world a Goan is, sorpotel is the social leveller. Cajel refers to a distilled liquor made of cashew and toddy is fermented coconut or palm juice, which is frequently used like yeast to make sannas, a type of rice cakes made in moulds with a batter of ground rice, toddy, coconut and sugar and then steamed. The predilection for sorpotel has been influenced by the historical context of Goans being a colonised people and as such it is an apt metaphor for the richness of the culture located in a small geographic area.

Food plays a significant part in weddings as well, as seen by these words by Flora:

The day after the wedding, It was in my mother-in-law's house they made that plain white rice with samarachi curry with dried prawns that is supposed to be a typical dish for second day wedding lunch, then third day at my mums place, it was the three days festivities. You must be knowing about that (Flora).

The samarachi codi refers to a curry made with coconut milk. Food is significant from the most private and everyday to the ritualised public celebrations like weddings. Such events and networking with other Goans or Christian Indians were another strategy for cultural maintenance.

Perinatal Rituals

Having a child is one of the most culturally and spiritually significant events for women and their families and the significance of this transition is validated through ritual. It is thought that cultures that have supportive rituals for new mothers have lower rates of postnatal distress (PND) and that women in Western countries are at high risk of developing PND. Rituals reflect the vulnerability and special status of the new mother and include being restricted to the home, being given assistance, being given special foods and massage.

In Indian communities the experience of pregnancy and birth is traditionally marked by nurturing and celebration of the status of women who are to become mothers. This nurturing is highlighted through the giving of special foods and assistance. Movements of new mothers are restricted to the home for forty days due to their perceived vulnerability postpartum. During this forty day period, assistance is given with personal care and the physical body is taken care of through massage and ensuring the mother has an opportunity to relax. Parturition is thought to generate a state of hotness and therefore weakness. Grandmothers can play an active part in the preparation of

special food and ensuring a nourishing diet that includes foods such as ghee, nuts, milk and jaggery which are given to return the body to balance.

This attentiveness and “endless care” that is received from the extended family (Shin & Shin, 1999, p.611) can be lost in the process of migrating. This celebration of the status of the new mother in ‘developing countries’ subverts the notion of ‘West is best’ and the backwardness of the East, that was taken for granted in my post-colonial upbringing. A recent article in NEXT magazine in New Zealand has suggested that rituals need to be re-instated to celebrate the status of motherhood (Sarney, 1999). Greta found that the shift from a social process of pregnancy to an individualised one a painful loss:

Everyone else does things for you and you know in that way you are just pampered. You get all these supposedly nourishing treats and foods and things you know. Like all these pulses and the sweets that you normally have. I’m not very sweet tooth, but I think they do help in a way you know. The nourishing factors. You know things like that. At the same time being here makes you think of all these things that you take for granted back home (Greta).

Focused individual care is given to new mothers, and family members take on roles in relation to food preparation and hospitality as in Lorna’s story:

You know you get your massages and things. Mum looks after the cooking because that takes away a lot of time and then you don’t have to worry about that. Goan things like moong, godshem and other lentils millet, tizan, and things like that, you know what that is. I guess you would have had that if you were coming from the traditional villages I’m sure, but ahh we have lost a lot of culture on the way. Yeah, yeah I guess you also have many more people around you in India so that if you are busy with doing something someone else can entertain make the tea or conversation (Lorna).

Migrating reminded Lorna of the loss of traditions that began with the move from traditional villages to urban settings prior to the migration to New Zealand. The drive for upward mobility (in the Western sense) in Goa and the concomitant loss of traditional ‘old fashioned’ rituals has resulted in loss of forms of nurturance from many cultures.

Being separated from family and culture meant were impediments to conducting traditional rituals. For some Goan women it meant not having anyone to consult who was bicultural and could see the importance of special food. Migration can lead to separation from family and trusted advisers leading to a ‘vacuum of knowledge’. Rowena was anxious about the appropriate food to be eating and struggled to create a new frame of reference and develop a sense of what she ‘should’ be doing. Rowena sought guidance but ultimately was unable to cook any of the things that she

thought might be useful because her husband worked long hours and there were no extended family members available to help her enact traditional rituals:

No, in fact I didn't know what to eat, but the hospital kept saying eat a normal diet. Do I have to have spicy food? They said since you've been eating it all your life and during pregnancy, you don't have to drink milk to get milk, just eat well. Because being alone I had to cook my own stuff, so I just continued eating my normal things (Rowena).

This example again highlights the tensions of attempting to fulfil cultural expectations but also fit into what was appropriate in the new culture.

Bringing family in to support rituals

Several participants brought mothers and mothers-in-law to New Zealand because it was unusual to have a baby 'by yourself', to help with tradition, food preparation, care of the baby and allow the new mother to rest. Lorna, Greta and Flora chose to bring family members over where possible to provide both support and assistance with rituals. Lorna was fortunate in being able to bring her mother over to help out, and points out the alien notion of the individualising of a major life event like birth:

Then you come to a place with no-one around you, you don't really know if you can make it alone. You know you are not very independent in a way, so it is unfamiliar to have a baby on your own. Yeah, so that's why, so you just sort of have Mum over everybody has Mum over, it's a Goan thing to do, it's an Indian thing to do (Lorna).

Greta was supported by both her mother and mother-in-law who came to New Zealand to assist with care of the baby and other household tasks which included food preparation and advice. Greta's example illuminates the richness and significance of cultural rituals in the postpartum period:

Fenugreek seeds and jaggery and coconut milk and she kept giving me that and I found that quite nourishing. I don't know whether that would generate just the milk and also a sort of porridge made from semolina. So I would bake that and a drink that would help me clear up my stomach too much of gas so those things helped me a lot (Greta).

The importance of food to many Goan rituals and special occasions is emphasised in Flora's recount of her child's christening which emphasised the symbolic significance of the Goan connection to the earth through the serving to guests of chickpeas and coconut: Flora's example highlights how she feels she needs to justify the significance or legitimacy of particular types of

food to 'Kiwis' or have it legitimated by them. This perhaps represents a sign of her wanting to 'fit in'. This could also be a way of justifying to white New Zealanders the attachment to things Goan:

Even for a normal party you see all Goan tradition, you must make this food you know, like for an auspicious occasion, like a Christening. Coconut in it, that is a must, you know a christening can't go without that. The Kiwis, you know wonder what are we serving boiled grams (chickpeas) for on an occasion like this. My aunt was going around to all the Kiwi guests saying you know I'm serving coconut. I didn't know what was the meaning behind it, but she was explaining you know chickpeas are the food of the soil, and coconut is also a food of the soil (Flora).

Therefore it can be seen that food plays an important role both in the private lives of Goans and the celebrations and life transitions such as parenthood. One of the many strengths that Goans have is the capacity for celebration and connection with each other through food and song. The internet and increased numbers in our global communities mean that we can more easily access whatever it means for us to be Goan.

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