

Reclaiming the Hindu Space in Goa: A Plant that is Tulsi

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Abstract

The article takes up the issue of the Hindus of Goa asserting public gaze and spaces that were unavailable to them till the liberation of Goa in 1961. The conquest of Goa by the Christian- Portuguese forces in early years of 16th century, even before the Mughals had set foot on the battlefield of Panipat in 1526, had imported a Christian-European state and culture and forced upon the Hindus of Goa in a manner that was most brutal in the history of Christian expansion and conversion. The imposition of Inquisition by the Christian state that ensured that all non-Christian symbols, life styles and even food and dress were stamped out in favour of European culture. Under the draconian Inquisition all visibility of non-Christian life was ordered to be barred and most were protected by going inside the houses. Tulsi was then the most brahminical plant and object of veneration for Hindus whoused to plant it in every house and since all non-Christian objects were barred from public view, this plant suffered long centuries of invisibility. With the decay of Inquisition in 1781 and later liberation from Portuguese rule, Tulsi came back to public view with vengeance. This article tries to trace the assertion of Hindu identity through the constructed visibility of the Tulsi in almost every Hindu house in Goa.

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Introduction

Tulsi or Holy Basil is sacred to Hindus all over India. It is an object of veneration and is also part of various dietary usages. In India a plant or tree or an animal is both holy and part of dietary habit at the same time. Its unique ecological-economic-ritual complex of India that has allowed binary of veneration and diet, something that non-Indic cultures find it difficult to comprehend. How can you eat and sacrifice the goat? How can one venerate Tulsi and consume in so many ways. This happens normally to an agricultural society that integrates ecology and rituals. There is certain amount of blurring of vegetation, domesticable animals and rituals, which happens in a long cultural process which are influenced some times by political compulsions.

Tulsi and its importance in Indian household is widespread and often cutting across the regional divides incorporating cultures. Tulsi (Holy Basil) is a domesticated plant (botanical name: *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, belonging to the family of Labiatae or Lamiaceae) which associated with mystical medicinal properties. It is reported to help in cough and cold, respiratory system, skin issues, urinary issues, fever, and

others. The fact that this sacred (holy) plant has been attributed with all kinds of medicinal values to protect and universalize its acceptance among the believers.

In Goa every Hindu house of the local Goans have a tulsi planted in a pedestal, called *Tulsi Vrindavan* which is associated with the Hindu God, Lord Vishnu, and was promoted to as universal domestic shrine by the immigrant and powerful Saraswat Brhahmans who had established the Brahmanical religion and traditions/rituals in Goa. Linking Goa to the Parshurama and declaring it to be part of Parshurama Kshetra, they achieved their strong social and economic presence in the island of Goa. Migrating from Kashmir and some other areas these of north India. Travelling for hundreds of kilometers and lots of difficulties, the Saraswat Brahmins who were exposed to the social and economic structures of the Aryan Hindus, and well versed with agriculture they not only brought Hindu religion and its attendant traditions, but also introduced the established agriculture in Goa. Soon they came to dominate the crop pyramid and determined the economic structures of the state. In a long process of integration with the larger Hindu land

mass of the subcontinent, the community under the leadership of the Saraswat Brahmans adapted to local crop patterns and included coconut in many rituals and ways of life. In the same process, Tulsi was adopted as ubiquitous sacred shrine to be present in every house. With the establishment of direct Christian-Portuguese colonial rule in the coastal state, and with strict imposition of Inquisition laws, many restrictions were placed on new Christians and many more on all other non-Christians to compel the non-Christians to convert. The prime intention of the Portuguese state was to convert all population to Christianity and if that did not happen then impose stringent restrictions and limitations on non-Christians. Though Inquisition was invented in Europe to train and discipline the new converts into the ways of Christian religion and traditions, but with territorial expansion, Inquisition was used to curb and convert the non-Christian masses. While newly converted Christians were to be kept within the flock and told about the ways of Jesus, the non-believers were to be not given any public space, no freedom to practice rituals or customs, no temple, no procession and not even disposal of the dead. Hindu temples were razed down to the ground and many were replaced by Churches. Portuguese made explicit and visible repression of all non-Christian and especially Hindu religion and rituals to protect the newly converted Christians from lapsing back to the charms of erstwhile religion and ways of life.

Along with the demolition of temples and emergence of white washed churches with completely different rituals and manners that were alien to the Goan Hindus. The number churches far outnumbered in number and sheer size of the population of Christians in the state in the early days of Portuguese rule that patronised Christianity in the most brutal manner. And yet the whitewashed Churches to be seen all over the state created a false-real sense of majority. Often a colonial state creates perceptions that are without much social reality but helps the imperial/colonial rules to establish narratives to bolster the colonial doctrine. Portuguese rule in Goa used Christianity for this purpose.

In the process of establishment of Christian-colonial-Portuguese rule in Goa, the Hindu and other religious shrines, symbols, artefacts, scriptures, food habits and even intangible history/ies were erased from the public landscape. Other than temples, minor shrines and religious processions, the much-revered Tulsi plants were forced to hide from public view so that new converts to Christianity were not tempted to return to the original faith or lest Tulsi corrupts them to return to the old fold. The simple medicinal plant adopted by Hindus for veneration and some cures became a political object for colonial suppression. Colonial dispensation and imperial governments are afraid of any cultural-political expression that can go against the colonial ethic which can be loosely defined as dominant and perhaps the only cultural and visual complex which was allowed to have visibility and get state patronage. The colonial administration creates an imported cultural complex and value system expressed in alien language to artificially create a fear psychosis among the 'natives'.

But with the lifting of Inquisition in AD 1812 and the steep decline of Portugal as a colonial power and its subsequent loss of leadership of the Christian-evangelist in Europe, the Christian administration of Goa became tolerant of other religions but the fear and hesitation remained. It is only with the liberation of Goa in 1961 that the people of non-Christians could come out with their belief systems, rebuild their temples and celebrate their public festivals, some of which were from

other areas like Ganesh Chaturthi and some indigenous Naraka Chaturdasi and Tulsi vivah were brought of sleep induced hibernation and are now more visible.

During the Portuguese rule, the Christian symbols and shrines that included crosses, minor chapels, and names of houses were the visible signs of Christian religion and its supreme power. And they are still all over Goa, betraying the all-powerful people who followed a particular faith. So much so that despite not being in majority in Goa, the general perception of Goa is that it is a Cristian state. Whichever way you drive, you see white washed churches at most enviable locations. This omnipresence of churches gave a clear impression of which community was in dominant position. So with the liberation of Goa from the Portuguese rule, the non-Christian residents of Goa got the opportunity to socially express themselves, the most important of this coming out in open was the placement of the Tulsi plant in the front of the houses. It may also be due to houses becoming smaller with partition of homes and land and no space for courtyards called *aangans* in the houses that Tulsi had to be taken out and put in the front of the houses. But the social and political confidence of non-Christians cannot be denied who could now dare or afford to display their religious and social affiliations with fear. They always had Tulsi in the houses or worshipped Ganesha, but these were hidden from the public views to avoid persecution. Now Goans were free to wear their religions on their sleeves.

The presence of Tulsi *vrindavan* (Pedestal) was universal, but they were of different sizes and shapes according to the financial social conditions of the house owners. From simple mound of mud on which the Tulsi was planted to flower pot of clay to concrete *vrindavan* to plastic structure to larger and very decorated pedestals, it varied. But the visibility of new Hindu identity and assertion was not in doubt. To assert this new found Hindu identity of the houses and their residents, these Tulsi *vrindavans* were made bigger in affluent houses and were embellished with all kind of flowers and pictures of gods and goddesses. The tulsi plant now became symbol and tool of Hindu identity and not just medicinal plant. When located in a temple, due to larger fundings and bigger viewership, the *vrindavan* were larger and more decorated. The tulsis located in temples were open to all the people of the faith and just any one could worship them. These temple tulsis were centre of attraction of community and people who made individual and collective efforts to clean and make offerings. In that way these tulsis became a tool for social bonding and cooperative care taking of common objects of religion. This itself was absent in the Portuguese times which had prohibited all public displays by non-Christians and that included the tulsi as well.





This new found political and religious freedom available to the Hindus, led to mass celebration of Tulsi vivah (marriage of Tulsi) in Goa. This unique ritual which was celebrated as mass festival but in individual manner. In this ritual tulsi is married to the Vishnu or his representation in Shaligram in a ceremonial manner. Women (generally) of the household worshipped the sacred tulsi some 9 days after the Hindu festival of Diwali being the *Kartik Shukla Dwadashi*. Tulsi is decorated with flowers mainly marigold, various local vegetables and fruits, banana stems, and all the rituals and customs of Hindu marriages like a pandit chanting mantras along with womenfolk of the household, mangalsutras, kanyadaan etc were followed. With every Hindu household of Goa performing this ritual and sometimes a few families join together to do it, this festival has acquired the shape of a popular and mass festival though sans any pomp and mics etc unlike the Ganesh Chaturthi of Naraka Chaturdasi. It has remained a simple domestic puja celebrated universally.

Definitely over the years various refinement and show of wealth has appeared in this puja like better sari for Tulsi, more fruits, more flowers and larger food quantities prepared but it remains simple ritual.



The refinement in objects used in tulsi vivah comes from relative prosperity of the Hindus of Goa. Post liberation various jobs were opened to the Hindus and many Hindu Goans started working abroad and in many towns of India and their money came back to Goa in form of better houses and more pomp in festivals and offerings made to gods. The appearance of hundreds of temples in Goa is also result of the same economic prosperity of the Hindus of Goa. Tulsi vivah too changed in many ways. New fruits were added. Along with local flowers some flowers from outside Goa were added, clothes to drape tulsi were expensive saris, new found affluence and the political-social space to show that was a new social reality in Goa, Tulsi vivah along with Ganesh Chaturthi and Naraka Chaturdasi were the high visibility religious rituals that have become powerful show of Hindu identity.

The veneration of tulsi has taken a commercial angle. From a family made tulsi pedestal of mud and local flower pot, now the concrete and plastic vrindavans are made by a fabricator and sold in nurseries and on road sides and even proper shops.



While local level and self-made or made by masons had unique characters with well-chosen gods to be featured in and reflected the individual taste, preferences and exposure to 'religious information', meaning the kind of retention of religious knowledge the owner of the house it had. At Chorao Island, I noticed a new house with huge tulsi vrindavan which family proudly placed in the front of the house to compliment the temple nearby. One cannot deny the hidden wish of the hitherto suppressed Hindus of Goa to make larger and more decorated vrindavans to come out of Christian imposed social restrictions, but generally having a Tulsi in the front of the house. All new houses of Hindus definitely made a Vrindavan at a place of importance in the house.



The idea of having a tulsi in the house, new or old, was to declare the Hindu identity to all who cared to look. Along with that the houses started being given a Hindu name, written in large chrome letters or even concrete to appropriate the 'visual-public-spaces' to counter or emulate the way the Cathoils displayed a Christian name to demarcate the powerful religious affiliation. In political realms, keeping a name and proudly displaying the same on the houses had a colonial logic of superior claims on land and minds of the conquered people. The omnipresent cross and chapels and other Christian symbols along with the Christian names on the houses meant not only to scare the non-Christians, but also flood the visuals and minds of the new converts to Christianity with Christian sights and keep them under awe. This technic was used by all imperial and colonial powers like the Muslim rulers from 1200 AD onwards and later the British rulers to subjugate the people morally. The superior claims of Persian and English language (and similarly Portuguese language in Goa) and Islamic and European architecture in the shape of Taj mahal or imperial buildings of Lutyen's Delhi served the same imperial/colonial purposes. The imposition of colonial/imperial cultural complex often acquired an alien language, like the way British named the roads and places in English which was a European language with high degree of unfamiliarity for the large sections of the people in India. That helped to establish the high British/European cultural complex in India. The high Persian literature and the whole etiquette of the Muslim-Mughals created a very high degree of alienation for the Hindu masses who did not understand the Persian-Farsi language and could not follow or adapt to the Mughal-Persian way of life and Tehzeeb.

Portuguese had created such a chasm in Goa through the artificially constructed Portuguese-Christian-Catholic super culture communicated through Portuguese language. Next was suppression of Goa-Hindu culture by not allowing them to perform any custom, ritual or even show of religious symbol. Hence the return of Tulsi planted in various types of pedestals and finally the mass celebration of was show of newly acquired Hindu identity expressed through public visibility of buildings, names, temples, and the most universal tulsi vrindavan.

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